

THE Strange Adventure OF A BROKE MERCENARY

WRITTEN BY Mine • ILLUSTRATED BY peroshi



NOVEL

2

VISIT...

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“Adding that on to your current total—oh, fine, I’ll throw in a slight discount. Forget about the copper coins. Let’s say you’re at twenty-three gold and eighty silver.”

“That’s more than my life’s savings there.”

The shopping venture ended up raising Loren’s debt to Lapis by a considerable amount.



Scena

A young girl whom Loren and Lapis picked up after finding her collapsed in the forest. While she was foggy on what had happened, she was evidently the daughter of a well-to-do house. Thus, she was to be escorted home with a retinue of guards...

Lapis

A priest who served as the healer of the first party Loren ever worked with. Owing to a certain secret of hers, she decided to stick around with Loren after that.

Loren

A former mercenary who became an adventurer after his mercenary company fell to ruin. He boasts enough physical strength to easily swing around a sword as tall as he is. While he generally looks rough around the edges, he has a surprisingly wide breadth of knowledge.

Claes

Young and distinguished, he leads an adventurer party that has garnered the realm's attention. He can be a bit of a skirt-chaser, however. His party includes Leila the knight, Laure the priestess, and Ange the magician.



The hem of Scena's dress swayed as she floated into the air. Her golden locks, which had previously gleamed with the luster of youth, had lost all their gloss. Her hollow, half-open eyes would not focus, and her small, slack mouth leaked a ceaseless cry that, while faint, made Loren want to cover his ears. Her skin had gone a sickly white and emitted a constant stream of equally white haze. It ran along her body, then to the altar, then the ground.

Whatever had given off the initial light continued to glow faintly in Scena's chest, its glimmer raising goosebumps on Loren's skin.

"Yes... This is what the master wished for... A true lord of the dead..."

Stehr's voice trembled with delight. She was long dead. She couldn't feel the dread that overpowered the living.

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Seven Seas Entertainment

KUITSUME YOHEI NO GENSO KITAN Volume 2

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Illustrations by peroshi

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Söldner in großer Armut

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Prologue:

Adding to Debts

THE RUMOR was spreading—a whole village, wiped out.

Haven't I heard this one before? Loren thought as he tipped back his glass, once more all on his own. The rumor just confirmed what he had already known. It was nothing new, nothing uncommon, just the sort of idle banter that wandered into his ear whenever he loitered around the adventurers' guild.

The desire to secure new farmland was like a chronic disease that plagued every noble in every country. More farms meant more produce, more produce meant more taxes, and more taxes meant heavier wallets for the taxman. The decimation of a village or two meant nothing to the kings and nobles who considered peasants an expendable resource. They might click their tongue, then in their next breath, they would propose the foundation of a new village and give it their immediate stamp of approval. They had to regain the money they had just lost on this failed venture, after all.

Yes, ultimately, it always came down to money. Money was an inescapable chain that bound every living soul. Naturally, Loren was no exception. As he sighed to lament his fate, a cheerful voice brushed past his ears as if to blow away these dark thoughts.

"Oh? Mr. Loren? Drinking so early in the morning?"

A girl had pushed open the bar's double doors and swiftly homed in on Loren in the corner. A black ponytail bounced behind her, and she wore the white vestments of one who served a god. Her looks could turn heads on any street she walked down. Her name was Lapis, and she was a priest to the god of knowledge.

"Pardon me, Mr. Loren, but did you have the money to drink away?" Lapis's query was so pure and genuine that Loren for a moment forgot he was penniless—and just as soon remembered. He scowled.

Loren had once made a living as a mercenary, until the day his company met

its end on the battlefield. The lone survivor, and narrowly at that, Loren had been left with no choice but to become an adventurer in whatever backwater town he found himself next. However, the very first job he took in his new line of work had cost him dearly. Most pressingly, he had lost the sword that had served him so well all these years. He had also used up what little money he had left before he even got to pay his hospital bills.

There was a power within Loren. It only rose within him when he was in dire need of it—and it didn't always do so. But it had saved him, this time around, and it had once more landed him in need of professional medical care.

It wasn't as if he had actually been injured, so Loren had been certain he would be released soon enough. However, he had apparently placed a considerable strain on his body. The doctor ordered an additional two days of rest after he regained consciousness.

As of this morning, his days of bed rest were at an end; he was finally a free man. That said, Lapis had shouldered all his hospital fees, and in exchange, he had promised to accompany her until he repaid his debt.

For starters, his treatment and hospitalization had cost five silver. Added to this was the ten copper he had borrowed for transportation fees during their first job, which put him at five silver, five copper. However, the doctor's extension of mandatory bed rest had inflated the number even further, and he presently owed closer to ten silver and change.

"Well, you did just get released, so I understand that you'd want to drink." Without waiting for his answer, Lapis placed her own order with a passing waitress and handed over four copper. "I'm footing his bill too."

The cheap swill in Loren's glass was, in fact, the cheapest booze the bar offered. It still cost two copper. He had ordered it out of pure habit.

As he held his head at this blunder, Lapis sat across from him. She accepted a cup of fruit juice the waitress brought over, picked it up with both hands, and sipped the contents. "Drinking on an empty stomach isn't good for you, you know," she said. "Even more so, given that you're still recuperating. How about you order something to fill you up too?"

"No money, remember?" he said. *Then you shouldn't've ordered cheap swill*

either, he thought irritably at himself.

Before the thought finished, Lapis had plucked a few copper from her pocket and presented them with a beaming smile. “It’s on me, of course.”

“My debt just keeps going up.”

“What does it really matter? I’m not forcing you to pay it back. Why, it would be a lot easier if you just stuck around with me, so problem solved. Ah, Ms. Waitress, an egg sandwich for me, no mustard. A ham sandwich for this gentleman here.” As the waitress passed again, Lapis placed an order and stuck ten copper in her hand.

As a matter of course, the bar run by the adventurers’ guild only took payment in advance. Adventurers were a rough crowd, and if the guild served food before money exchanged hands, a number of their clientele might dine and dash or flat-out refuse to pay. Most people couldn’t dream of getting away with that sort of behavior scot-free. But the adventurer set included those who fought for a living as well as those who shared a skill set with common thieves. A considerable percentage of them could pull it off. Thus, pay before play.

In that case, why had Loren been given that first drink? He glanced at the waitress, who gave him a sympathetic smile that said she knew what he was going through.

Knowing she had been showing concern only made him itch. It forced him to ask the question he feared. “How much is a ham sandwich?”

“Five copper. It’s the same price as my egg sandwich,” said Lapis. *Would you have preferred the egg?* her inquisitive expression seemed to say.

Loren let out a deep sigh. “Again with the debt.”

“We really must pick up some work then. But you’ve lost your weapon, Mr. Loren. What are we going to do?”

The sort of massive sword Loren preferred to wield wouldn’t be sold in an ordinary shop. Counting the hilt, it stood about as tall as he did, and its blade was thicker than Lapis’s waist. It was so heavy that one had to wonder who in their right mind would even think to use it, and it wouldn’t be easy to replace. Loren couldn’t even imagine how much it would cost to have one custom-

made.

From time to time he regretted having lost it, but he wouldn't get anywhere crying over spilled milk. *For now, I need to make money*, he thought as he glanced at the guild gathering hall beside the bar—where the board layered with quests was posted.

“A quest I can take without a weapon...” he muttered.

“No ditch cleaning, okay?” said Lapis. “The smell will linger something awful. Oh, but I do know a good deodorant; would you like me to buy one for you? In that case, go ahead.”

Loren cast a dubious eye toward Lapis, but she took the look head-on and declared, “I mean, I said you would have to accompany me. Why must I hang around someone who smells of sewage?”

He understood where she was coming from and reluctantly ejected the option from his head. Sure, he could always take the job on top of borrowing funds for the deodorant, but for some reason, he got the haunting feeling she would buy one that cost just as much as the quest paid.

“So what else can I take without a weapon?” he asked.

“Well, let's see...”

As Lapis placed a hand to her cheek and thought, the waitress gracefully delivered a plate of sliced egg sandwiches. Once Lapis took it, Loren got his ham.

“How about we put all these difficult matters aside for the moment and eat?” said Lapis.

“It doesn't feel that difficult to me...” said Loren, at this point rather tired.

Though he said that, the smell of the sandwiches enticed him. He picked up a slice and shoved it in his mouth whole. Who could blame him? He had spent the entirety of the time since his previous quest in a hospital. Naturally, the food they offered there was for sick patients, and while nutritious, it severely lacked in flavor. After enduring four days of that pallid fare, a simple sandwich of ham and mustard on toast was unreasonably delicious.

At the same time, Loren picked up the whispers of two adventuring men who, like him, had been drinking in broad daylight. The tags hanging at their necks were black—iron-rank, a step above his own copper.

“Ha, get a load of that guy,” one jeered. “He’s a gigolo, a moocher.”

“Hmph, he’s just a copper, and he’s being treated by a woman. We hardly got leftovers here.”

Loren chewed the ham, licked the mustard off his fingers, and thought for a moment. Indeed, his current standing practically invited heckling from everyone around him. That said, just because he understood the motive didn’t mean he would overlook this.

“You shouldn’t worry about them, Mr. Loren.” Lapis held a slice of egg sandwich with two hands, biting from a corner. She glanced at the adventurers laughing and mocking from their corner but quickly lost interest.

“Let ’em look down on you once, and they’ll look down on you forever,” said Loren.

“Is that mercenary code? I don’t really get it, but it’s foolish to take them seriously,” she declared as if already bored. Conversely, she seemed to relish her sandwich, which was no more than thin slices of boiled egg sprinkled with salt and pepper. “I mean, they’re only like that because they don’t even *have* a girl to mooch off of.”

The two men leapt up at Lapis’s barb.

“Oh, it’s on!”

“The hell’d you just say?!”

So excitable, thought Loren as he stood to meet them. But Lapis placed a hand on his shoulder before he could get too far—though she remained expressionless.

“Nice provocation,” he said. “I’m gonna go kill ’em up a bit.”

“No ‘killing ’em up,’” she said. “That would be a crime, for what it’s worth. A proper adventurer knows how to retaliate ninety percent of the way—and only when their opponent picks the fight, of course. And no going through their

pockets. *That* would be theft.”

“Got it.”

“Also, break any furniture and you’ll have to repay the guild. Oh, but I’ll be the one paying, so please, go wild.”

“Kinda bringing me down here...”

The iron-rank adventurers sneered. On top of their two-to-one advantage, they knew the color of the tag on Loren’s neck was copper.

“What an idiot. We’re iron, you got that?”

“Rub your head on the floor and beg, and we’ll just take the woman and let you off. She’s a priest, right? That’s gonna be useful.”

“I’ll bet you’ve enjoyed her enough to be sick of her already, damn gigolo. Why don’t you just let us—”

Loren knew he would likely end up actually killing these men if he let them finish their spiel. Thus, he cut the man off with a punch to the face. A light one; he held back ever so slightly.

Had Loren been a normal adventurer, this would have kicked off an all-out brawl. However, though weaponless now, Loren normally wielded a sword too heavy for any average warrior to use. As one might expect, he therefore required the strength to swing this sword, and even if he held back a bit, his strength couldn’t, practically speaking, be contained. Especially when he had caught his foe off guard.

The adventurer’s body flew in a tailspin, dragging tables and chairs behind him as he crashed into the bar wall with a pronounced smashing sound. Loren dropped his shoulders with a wince. That one was on him—he had underestimated himself again.

“Ah, a wall and a table set. That will cost quite a bit,” said Lapis, who was up on her feet before he realized it.

Wait, wasn’t there another guy? When Loren looked down, he saw the other iron collapsed, eyes rolled back in his head, splinters strewn all around him.

“Good grief, what do these people think they’re doing, talking that way to a

maiden?” Lapis muttered indignantly as she tossed a half-broken chair back onto the man’s unconscious body.

All right, but a maiden wouldn’t normally beat back an iron-rank adventurer with a chair, Loren thought, though he held his tongue. He watched Lapis push more money on the waitress, insisting it was compensation for repairs, and let out another sigh.

Chapter 1:

Acceptance to Shopping

“HERB GATHERING? You chose quite a safe one.”

After the fight—or rather, the one-sided beatdown—at the bar, they had fled to avoid further complications. Loren didn’t necessarily expect them, but he had snatched a sheet from the quest board and promptly taken his leave.

The quest he had taken was to collect herbs from the forest near town. The forest didn’t harbor any particularly powerful monsters. The guild ranked the quest’s difficulty at the absolute lowest tier and would only pay two copper per stalk. Loren saw it as more of an errand than a quest, really, but as adventurers got themselves injured every day of the year, the guild could never get enough medicinal herbs. They kept this quest perpetually posted.

“If we won’t expect any real danger, I should be fine unarmed,” he said.

It was the most feasible quest for Loren given his current predicament, but the low reward did little for his motivation.

The table, chairs, and wall repairs altogether added up to four silver, which put his current debt at fourteen silver and ten copper.

“You’ll need seven hundred and five stalks to fully pay it off,” Lapis declared.

“Now you’re just trying to break my spirit. There probably aren’t even that many in the whole forest.”

The forest itself wasn’t particularly large either. Perhaps that was to be expected of a wood so meager it couldn’t support anything dangerous. It was only a one-stound walk from town too. A stound equaled a twelfth of a day, and while Loren didn’t know quite how it worked, the larger towns rang a bell at precisely every stound.

A stound later, Loren got straight to work, scouring the forest for medicinal herbs. Those very same herbs had saved him more times than he could count in mercenary work. He was well aware of what they looked like and where they

grew. Their pointed leaves stood out, and once you'd seen one of them, it was near impossible to mistake them for any other sort of plant.

"How horribly dull," Lapis said as she trailed behind. She offhandedly uprooted a stalk and held it up to eye level. She studied it a while before stuffing it into her own cloth bag.

"Why are you picking herbs too?" Loren asked.

"I have to earn my keep, don't I? What are we going to do when I have no money left to lend you?"

He had wondered why she decided to do a quest with such poor returns when she had enough money to lend. Her answer, however, made him wearily hang his head. *We're working under the premise that you're going to lend me more?*

The thought had admittedly occurred to him before; he couldn't think of any other reason she would work with him.

"More importantly, Mr. Loren, you're missing quite a few as you go."

"Ugh... I'm not good at this stuff."

Loren recognized a number of herbs, and he was filling his bag, but no matter what he did, he overlooked a few here and there. Lapis merely collected the ones he failed to see in the areas he had already harvested, but since picking began, their bags had swelled at essentially the same rate. A testament to just how many Loren allowed to slip by.

"I could pay you back in a heartbeat if a war or two broke out," he grumbled. While he said that, he found he wasn't too eager to return to the mercenary life. He had been at it for a long time, to be sure, but it wasn't as if he had chosen to reap lives for his daily bread. Consequently, while his company's death pained him, he found himself wondering whether this was a good opportunity to wash his hands of it all.

"Even if there *was* a war, why, you have no equipment," said Lapis. "Are you going to enlist as a normal soldier for the provisional gear?"

"Yeah, not on my life."

The equipment provided to conscripted farmers and fresh recruits was, to be blunt, a travesty. This wasn't a guarantee, but war chest funds were handed off a dozen times before anyone made a purchase, and during the process, a large portion of those funds inevitably disappeared to who-knew-where. But missing money didn't change the number of hands in need of weaponry. Instead, the lack reflected in the quality of the equipment: shoddy spears that snapped at the first good thrust and crumbling leather armor that fell apart with normal wear.

The sorry truth of this situation never reached the ears of those determined young soldiers. Loren only knew about it from company members who had been in charge of accounting, and it was through them that he had come to understand why the soldiers he met on the battlefield were often so hopelessly frail.

It wasn't long before they reached the opposite side of the forest from where they began. They had plucked a straight line through, and with that distance, Loren had filled about half his bag. Around twenty stalks, give or take. "Not nearly what I was hoping for," he sighed.

Lapis's bag, as expected, was just about as laden as his. "There's not much we can do about that. It's a perpetual quest, which means there's always someone else out here doing it too."

They still had a stound or so before sunset, but considering the return trip, it was about time to pack up. Loren didn't have the slightest desire to spend the night outdoors without a weapon. If anything, he longed for the somewhat hard bed at the inn.

"Let's head out," he said.

"That would put us at a slight loss."

Loren sent Lapis a frown, and she explained herself, looking ever unconcerned. "The inn that the adventurers' guild recommends is thirty copper a night. Food can range all over the place, but it's generally five to seven copper. Add on ale, and that's two copper a glass. So, you see, this totals up to forty-five to fifty-three copper in daily living expenses."

Loren worked it out again himself, but the number of herbs in his hand

definitely didn't add up to enough. The point was, if he didn't budget better, doing jobs like this would only send him further and further down the hole into debt. Even if he did figure out his room and board tonight, he wouldn't have nearly enough money to repay Lapis.

"If I may be so bold, I propose you start by borrowing enough money—from me—to get your equipment in order."

"I'll consider it. And wait, hold up, then how do the other coppers make a living? Don't tell me they're also—" Loren cut himself off.

"Indeed, they are drowning in debt." Lapis tied her bag closed. "That's why they jump at well-paying jobs far beyond their capabilities. Sure, they're rolling in dough if they succeed, but failure means farewell to this cruel world. If you're looking for a more *reliable* route, the most realistic would be to steadily raise your rank to iron and be picked up by a capable party."

"Harsh..." Loren began to wonder if mercenaries were actually the lucky ones when it came to money. At least with the company he'd never had to worry about his next meal, and while scanty, he'd always had some pocket change. And if he left his equipment to the guy in charge of such things, it would generally be replaced or maintained by the time the next war came around. "I'm feeling sorry for the chief and the guys in accounting."

"That's life for you."

However, Lapis's somewhat enlightened words did not fill Loren's sack. *I guess I'll raise my debt some more, get a weapon, and try something that pays better next time*, Loren thought as he prepared to leave.

Suddenly, he felt a presence on his skin. He shoved the sack he had just tied up at Lapis.

She sniffed. "You want me to carry your bags?"

"Wrong. I want you to be quiet." Loren clenched his empty hands, lowered his voice, and held Lapis back before she could complain any further. Realizing something unusual was afoot, she shut her mouth and meekly held his bag against her chest alongside her own.

"C'mon. There's something there," he said.

The faint scent of beasts mixed with that of the verdant forest. Loren picked up the direction from barely audible growls—then stepped off the path and plunged into the forest.

“If there’s something out there, shouldn’t we run *away*?” Lapis gasped.

“Point taken, but I’ve got a bad feeling about this.”

It wasn’t long at all before this bad premonition proved itself accurate. They burst out into a small clearing, and in the center of it lay a body.

“Mr. Loren! There’s a girl on the ground.”



Indeed, in front of them lay a girl in a white dress whose blonde hair spilled out over the earth. Lapis's eyes were focused on her, but Loren's caught the source of the beastly scent he had earlier detected.

"Over there!" he called.

"They're forest wolves!" Lapis identified the beasts.

These creatures called the forests their home and were not particularly large, but they moved and hunted as a pack, making them risky in terms of numbers. They weren't so dangerous alone, but their threat level rose exponentially in a group, and they had killed many an adventurer who ventured into this forest unprepared.

"We're getting her out!" Loren decided. "Any objections?"

"None, but what about your weapon?!"

"These are enough to play with dogs." Loren brandished a clenched fist as he charged.

A few of the wolves saw his intent and they left their formation to intercept. The first wolf leapt forward off a tree, gaining speed and force with its pounce. Loren countered it with a fist to the face.

Its nose was crushed, its jaw cracked. It spun through the air in nigh comical fashion before colliding with a tree, where it yelped and perished. In the time it took for that to happen, Loren crushed the windpipe of another wolf in his grasp and threw it aside. As it writhed in pain, he stomped on its head. It twitched and then stilled.

Another wolf attempted to bite Loren's leg and found its teeth couldn't break through the thick leather of his armor; it was grabbed, hoisted up in this moment of confusion. Then it was swung into a tree. It died the instant its spine snapped.

Yet another wolf took that chance to slip past Loren and lunge at Lapis instead, but Loren grabbed it by the tail, swinging it before it could twist and bite him. In its dizzied stupor, Loren cleanly broke its neck.

It had all happened so fast and without pause. A restless air spread over the

remaining forest wolves, who had so quickly lost four comrades.

“These things edible?” Loren asked.

“Eating their meat is ill-advised, but their pelts do fetch some money. However, Mr. Loren, do you know how to properly skin a beast? To clarify, I do not.”

“Don’t even have a knife, so I guess we just toss ’em.”

They had come to pick herbs and hadn’t made the preparations they would have needed to take four wolves back with them. It did feel like a waste, but there was little Loren could do about it. With his next step—the step of a foe the wolves knew they couldn’t hope to match—the ring of beasts broke and scampered off.

Loren didn’t have it in him to chase down the animals when he didn’t have a real bone to pick with them. He waited at the ready a while, in case they came back, but soon fell out of his stance and walked over to where the girl had collapsed.

She looked to be around ten years old, and she wasn’t dressed for the forest. Loren had considered this might be some sort of trap, but he couldn’t think of anyone who would go out of their way to use a girl like this to bait him. He looked around but didn’t see any sign of anything like that either.

“I’ll stand guard,” he said. “Can you have a look at her?”

“Yes, yes, I understand.”

This was a young girl they were dealing with, after all. It was far better in every way for Lapis to investigate her condition. She knelt down, took the girl’s pulse, and looked all over to see if anything was wrong. Loren, meanwhile, concentrated on their surroundings. The forest wolves had retreated for now, but they might well regroup to attack again, better prepared than before.

“This girl’s pretty lucky, isn’t she?” said Lapis. Dirt and dead leaves stuck fast to the child’s hair and face. Perhaps Lapis felt it pitiful to leave her like that, as she began gently brushing off her head and body.

“Lucky? When she was surrounded by wolves?”

“Well, I mean, we *did* find her before she was eaten. And with those numbers, the other wolves could have easily hurt her while you were dealing with the first four. I’d say she was incredibly lucky. Wouldn’t you?”

“I guess... There are plenty of unlucky people out there, so there’s got to be at least a few lucky ones.”

“So it all balances out in the end.” The girl remained unconscious as Lapis cradled her still body, holding her as she turned to Loren. “Incidentally, why did you look at me when you said unlucky?”

He hurriedly averted his eyes from her smile.

It was past time to leave regardless. They had no reason to loiter around a forest with an unknown but clearly young girl in tow.

Loren left the child to Lapis for the time being, though he continued scanning the area for any trace of who might be related to her being there. He couldn’t find a thing. He also couldn’t bring himself to simply leave the girl in the dirt and concluded they would have to bring her back to town.

“But something doesn’t sit right,” he muttered.

“Are you going to abandon her?”

“That sits even worse.”

Sure, the kid couldn’t be more than ten, but Loren thought it would be a bit much to ask Lapis to carry her all the way back. He had Lapis keep his bag of herbs and then threw the girl onto his back. Once he had a firm grip, he was surprised by her lightness.

“She’s pretty tiny, isn’t she?” he said. “Oh, but I don’t mean malnourished. Don’t misunderstand. Little on the chubby side, even. I reckon this little miss is from quite a well-to-do household.”

Lapis read the surprise on his face. As she walked beside him, she squeezed the unconscious girl’s leg. Despite having collapsed in the middle of the forest, she was barefoot. “She doesn’t have much musculature and there are no calluses on her soles or palms. Either she doesn’t walk around much or she is

impeccably groomed.”

“More importantly, it’s not sane to walk around a forest without shoes.”

“You’re right. And normally, one would expect that to leave her soles in quite a sorry state.”

The path through the wood was somewhat maintained, but walking over it with bare flesh would inevitably cut and peel away at one’s soles. However, the girl’s skin was glossy and smooth, not a blemish in sight. This bothered Loren too, but what disconcerted him more was her dress. The girl wore white, the color most easily stained, yet there seemed to be no such stains on her clothing. All that together made it hard to believe she had walked through a forest.

“Well, we can figure it out when she wakes up,” said Lapis as they entered town.

“I’m more worried that we’ll be mistaken for kidnappers,” said Loren.

“I suppose we are two potential sociopaths, hauling around a poor little girl and all.”

“Could you please not include me in that count like it’s nothing?”

That said, Lapis suggested they take the girl to the guild. Loren was sure they would be stopped, given how suspicious they looked, but strangely enough, Kaffa’s gatekeepers didn’t even blink. Come to think of it, they hardly stopped anyone coming or going.

“It’s a different matter when someone is quite clearly a criminal, but they’re generally pretty lax,” said Lapis.

“Guess I wouldn’t know how to defend myself if they called me a kidnapper anyway.”

“Do you imagine there are many human traffickers who would so boldly commit misdeeds with a priest right beside them?”

“Priests are pretty amazing, I guess,” he sighed.

“The trust society places in us is second to none.” Lapis boldly stuck out her chest.

Where does she think that trust comes from? Loren thought. People trusted priests because they served gods. The priest herself had done nothing to earn it.

Once they arrived at the guild, Loren was skewered with dozens of searching eyes—perhaps for dragging two women along. However, he brushed them off and tilted his head, searching for another problem. What if more adventurers were looking to pick a fight like the ones from earlier?

Before he'd finished the thought, Lapis explained the situation to a receptionist at the front desk, who she brought over to Loren and the girl.

"You secured someone in need of rescue in the forest," said the receptionist. "Is that correct?"

"Yeah, that's right. See for yourself."

Loren turned his back to show the girl dangling from it. The receptionist peered at the girl's resting face and then seemed to hit on something. She shouted a few orders to the staff members behind the desk, and soon, two of them ran out with a stretcher.

"We will take charge of her," said the woman. "Is that all right with you?"

"All yours. Can't just leave her hanging there forever." Loren slowly lowered the girl from his back and lay her on the stretcher. Once she had settled in place, the two staff members lifted the stretcher in unison, though the moment they lifted her up, they both seemed rather surprised.

They're shocked by her weight too, thought Loren.

That done, the receptionist beckoned him to the counter with her hand.

"I'll just come out and say it—we didn't abduct her," he said.

"I'm smart enough to know that an abductor wouldn't entrust their abductee to the guild," she teased. "There's something else I need to speak with you about."

"By you, you mean the both of us?"

"Yes, if I may ask your priest friend to come along too."

Lapis nodded when he looked at her. No issue there. The two of them were brought into a meeting room behind the front desk.

The receptionist started speaking as soon as she took a seat. "I'll cut to the chase. For the time being, we would like to set a restriction on your movements."

This was so sudden that Loren didn't know what was going on. His confusion forced Lapis to take the reins. "What do you mean by that?" she asked. "Have we caused some sort of problem?"

"No, not at the moment. The guild will be looking into the girl you brought in. We don't want you going too far until we have a result."

"You mean to say there's something strange about her?" asked Lapis.

"I cannot offer any further information on the matter at present."

Isn't this a tad overbearing? thought Loren. But he was under the impression that all managerial organizations were generally overbearing, and it didn't particularly concern him. *It's almost endearing when you put it up against the stupid whims of our company's top brass.*

That said, he had a rather pertinent question. "So how long's it gonna go on for, and what aren't we allowed to do?"

"As to specific terms..." The receptionist considered this. "We will likely know something concrete in a few days at most. As for the restrictions, we ask that you refrain from leaving town. We would be much obliged if you remained on standby at the inn we designate."

"Sounds like serious business."

The receptionist was pretty blasé about it, but in essence, they were being placed under house arrest. Although Loren supposed he would have denied her outright if she'd framed it as a demand. No matter what power the adventurers' guild had over registered adventurers, he wasn't going to listen to someone who didn't listen themselves.

That said, a bit of irritation had seeped into his voice, and while the receptionist seemed taken aback for a moment, she didn't back down. She

gritted her teeth and returned Loren's stare, going on with an immaculately steady tone. "We will get you a room at the Painted Pavilion on Main Street."

"Not ringing any bells."

Loren didn't know Kaffa. To be fair, he hadn't known just about every town he'd stopped by in his mercenary work. That said, he knew even less about Kaffa than other towns, as he'd had no time to look into it before crashing there.

"The Painted Pavilion is in the running for the best inn in town. Luxurious, and expensive enough to match," said Lapis.

"Of course, we will take care of food and lodging," said the receptionist. "We will even provide miscellaneous expenses to a degree—just say you're with the guild, and we'll cover it on our side."

"Oh, that's more than I could ask for," Lapis enthused.

"Is that seriously all it takes to hook an adventurer?"

Lapis widened her eyes in a rather contrived display of surprise. "Why, whatever do you mean?"

Loren scoffed, "I'm saying they're treating us too well. Any merc worth his salt knows not to take a job where the first thing the client does is talk up the massive reward."

The receptionist might have kept him on the line if she'd offered to cover the costs of a normal inn. But how could he not be suspicious when the guild suddenly ushered them toward the best place in town along with promises of food and pocket change?

"Isn't pretending not to notice and playing along only the human thing to do?" Lapis asked.

"I don't wanna hear that from you."

"I take it you're not going to accept these terms," said the receptionist.

Loren held up a hand to stop Lapis, whose sullen face indicated considerable dissatisfaction. Taking care to keep his voice calm, Loren turned back to the receptionist. He couldn't go further without knowing: "What's wrong with the

girl?”

“That is precisely what we’re looking into.”

While Loren understood he had phrased that poorly, he also understood that he wasn’t going to get a clear answer. He considered loyalty to one’s work a virtue, but he couldn’t stand being on the receiving end of it.

“You understand that we won’t be satisfied with that answer, don’t you?” asked Lapis.

The receptionist turned away. “That’s...”

“Please, at least tell us what’s most important. What are the chances that this matter turns sour for us?”

The receptionist couldn’t escape Lapis’s intent gaze. Her eyes darted, and she was silent for a while. Lapis didn’t press her further, simply waiting for her next words. Ultimately, the receptionist realized that at this rate, they wouldn’t accept the guild’s proposal. She exhaled a resigned breath, faint but long. Then she turned to Lapis, then to Loren, and spoke again. “I would say the chances are incredibly low. Truth be told, quite a few people on our staff believe they recognized the girl, but we’ll have to either wait until she wakes up or wait a few days until we have confirmation before we know for sure.”

Lapis nodded. “Mr. Loren, she probably means the girl came from somewhere pretty far from Kaffa, and her status is relatively high.”

The receptionist neither confirmed nor denied this. She instead wore a firmly business-like smile, an uncanny expression that proved Lapis was right on the money.

“I see. So in short, until the girl’s identity is confirmed and you can guarantee we had nothing to do with the fact that she was in the middle of the woods, the guild wants to keep us where they can see us,” Lapis concluded.

At a loss for words, the receptionist’s plastered smile convulsed at her cheeks and temple. Loren worried this undue stress would have an adverse effect on the woman, and as she awkwardly turned that smile toward him, he acquiesced. “You’ll take care of the inn and the money, right?”

“I’ll arrange for it at once. The Painted Pavilion... Would a double room work?” The look on the receptionist’s face made it seem like this was supposed to be some form of petty retribution.

“Sure, I don’t mind,” Lapis said.

“Oi, priest. Have some decency. Two singles. Otherwise, this talk never happened. Got it?” Loren said with a stern glint in his eyes. This prompted a sigh from both Lapis and the receptionist, if for different reasons.

Loren should have expected no less from an inn competing for the top spot in town. It felt a bit unsettling to eat on someone else’s bill, but Lapis didn’t seem to mind in the slightest. She showed no reservations about enjoying these luxuries to the fullest.

“You’ve got some nerve, you know that?” he snorted.

“Have fun when you have the chance. Otherwise, you’ll miss out on life.”

Why did I know she would say that? Loren thought.

But these blessed times didn’t last long. On their second day of extravagance, the adventurers’ guild sent a notice that the girl they’d rescued had regained consciousness. The guild wanted them at the guildhall, and Loren had to practically drag Lapis. She had laid down her roots at the inn, feeling completely at home.

Once they reached the usual bar, the same receptionist led them into the back.

“I apologize for any trouble we caused you. We have finished our investigation,” she said once they had taken their seats. Her lips were pressed thin, and she was clearly on guard. She bristled with the intent to say no more than necessary.

I didn’t think I bullied her that hard, thought Loren as he awkwardly scratched the back of his head.

The receptionist briskly went on, paying him barely any heed. She seemed to have rehearsed this beforehand. “We have concluded that the two of you had

no involvement with the matter, so we are lifting any and all restrictions. We thank you for your cooperation. Please carry on as you were.”

That was the end of the conversation. At least, the receptionist made sure it sounded that way. A letdown to Loren but seemingly not to Lapis. She not only ignored the receptionist’s implicit suggestion that they get along now and leave, she dug in her heels. “Is that really all there is?” she asked. “You’re not going to explain the details of what you found?”

“Is that necessary?”

“It certainly is. How could you possibly think it wasn’t?” Lapis tilted her head with deep-seated curiosity.

The receptionist’s expression turned tight; she fell silent as she looked into that face. Loren wasn’t one to stick his head into trouble, but he’d promised he’d tag along with Lapis and couldn’t leave while she refused to.

“That information is restricted to select adventurers higher than iron rank,” said the receptionist.

Restricted information meant the girl had a background that demanded discretion. Loren was familiar with the practice. Often, the higher-ups in his company knew all manner of tidbits that the grunts weren’t allowed to. The other members were either kept in the dark or compelled to pretend they were. His experience led him to go along with it now.

Tragically, it was not in Lapis’s nature to back off with so much unsaid. “But we’re the ones who brought her here, aren’t we?” she asked. “I don’t know the circumstances, but it seems to me that it would be good sense to explain *something*.”

A vibrant smile clashed with an irritated glare. Loren looked to the ceiling, imagining sparks flying. The receptionist had no reason to divulge the details to any adventurer below iron rank, but this mattered not one whit to Lapis, who despised being kept out of the loop, especially when she knew there was a secret afoot. No matter how long they kept at it, Loren expected they would never reach common ground. This would keep going until one side threw in the towel.

So, Loren tapped Lapis on the shoulder, turning her attention toward him.

“Mr. Loren?”

“Sorry about that, missy,” he said to the receptionist. “My partner here’s a priest to that god of knowledge. Try hiding things from her, and she’s like a dog with a bone.”

“I think I’ve...heard about such priests before.” The receptionist nodded. “I see. But I’m afraid this is a decision on the part of the guild.”

“Yeah, I know. You can’t speak, and I’m not gonna force you.”

“Wait, Mr. Loren?!” Lapis cried out at this treachery.

Loren placed a hand on her head and patted it so strongly that her head and shoulders moved with each stroke. “Just one other thing,” he said casually. “Can you tell us if someone’s already on the case? Do the guys who have to know, know?”

“Yes.” As this information didn’t directly pertain to what the receptionist wasn’t allowed to say, she answered easily enough. “We have already finished our selection process and spread the information to a chosen few.”

Loren removed his hand from Lapis’s head. She looked a bit dizzy, but he grabbed her by the arm and stood her up from her chair. “Got it. We’ll get going if you don’t need us for anything else. And we’ll check out of the Painted Pavilion by end of day.”

“I would be very grateful if you would. Thank you for your cooperation, Loren.”

“I can’t say you treated me poorly. Don’t worry about it.”

With a wave of his free hand, Loren pulled Lapis along and took his leave.

Lapis let herself be dragged a while before addressing him in hushed tones. “You have an idea, I take it.”

“Pretty much. Prod her all you want, but she’s got a duty of confidentiality, right? It would be a bigger issue if our prodding was enough to make her talk.”

Had the guild hired someone who cracked under such light pressure, Loren

wouldn't be able to trust them as an institution. From that point of view, while the receptionist's refusal to leak information did sour Lapis's mood, it had raised her credibility in Loren's eyes.

"You might have a point, but..."

"It's a pain to get someone talking about things they were told not to," Loren said. "In that case, just find an easier target."

"Do you have any leads?" Lapis asked, intrigued.

"I do. Just stick around a bit."

Lapis didn't know who Loren had in mind, but if it meant she would learn what she had been barred from knowing, she had no further reason to fixate on the receptionist. She pulled her arm free of his hand and clung to his arm.

"Oi, look here..." he said.

"I don't know where we're going, so you really must escort me, Mr. Loren. Now hurry along, chop-chop."

There would be no shooing her away now. His arm thus firmly grasped, Loren began to arbitrarily hit up adventurers drinking at the adjoining guild bar. He got a few matching accounts and went out into the town, passing through a few establishments before he found himself standing in front of a far seedier old bar in a corner of town.

It was evening by then; the sun had fallen and darkness was setting in. The dingy tavern had lit a few candles to alleviate the gloom, but far too few of them for the size of the room, leaving a large part of the main floor dim and obscure.

Loren spotted his mark at a corner table, and he headed straight for them. "Long time no—eh, a few days ain't too long. This seat open?" he nonchalantly asked.

This prompted the man to lift his face from his cheese slices and frothy drink. He looked up with just a hint of surprise. "You two? How'd you find me?"

"You're not that hard to track."

"It took around thirty copper for all the tips, but I deemed them a necessary

expense,” said Lapis. “It’s been a—rather short time, Mr. Chuck.”

Lapis lowered her head before following Loren’s lead, taking a seat across from Chuck the thief: a silver-rank adventurer they’d met on their previous job.

The waiter swooped in to take their order. Loren tried to turn her down, but Chuck added two ales before he could.

“You saved my skin back there,” said Chuck. “A drink’s the least I could do.”

“I don’t think I did that much,” Loren muttered. “Ended up ruining the quest by the end of it...”

“Don’t be daft,” Chuck insisted. “Sure, the earnings took a dip, but none of us could’ve done anything about that. We were lucky to get out alive, plain and simple. I’d be lying if I said I didn’t whine about it, but that’s gone and done with. Chin up.”

“Still, sorry.”

“I’m telling you we’re good, and that’s all I’ve got to say on my end. Anyway, you didn’t track me down for something so uptight, did you?”

The waitress placed two mugs of ale on the table. For a moment Loren thought over how to bring this up. As he glanced at Lapis, Chuck pushed the fresh cups toward them.

“First, a toast,” he said decisively. “We can talk after that.”

Loren was reluctant to decline what was offered to him. He picked up the mug and poured the frothy liquid down his throat. Beside him, Lapis sheepishly sipped at hers, holding the mug in two hands.

“So what brings you two to this neck of the woods?” Chuck asked, pushing the plate of cheese toward them as well.

“Truth is, we picked up a little girl in the woods the other day.”

“Ah? That was you guys? Funny how things work... Right, come to think of it, that quest was restricted to iron and up. And only the guild’s picks were given the details.”

“My partner here is dying to know what the deal is, and the knowing’s all we

need.” Loren glanced at Lapis, who had moved from the ale to the cheese.

“All right, I get where you’re comin’ from,” muttered Chuck as he slouched back in his seat. “But I’m a silver, you know? Do I look like I’m gonna leak information just like that?”

“Nah. But you were just about the only one who looked like you’d sell that info if there was enough to gain from it.”

The thief folded his arms, peering fixedly at Loren’s face a short while. But Loren had little left to say on his part. He fully intended to silently drink the time away until Chuck next opened his mouth.

“I’ll say it up front. Any adventurer who leaks his job is third-rate,” said Chuck. “They don’t get too far, and they don’t get to silver.”

Obviously, thought Loren. Such an adventurer couldn’t possibly earn trust. And it was hard to imagine an untrustworthy worker could be given enough work to rise through the ranks. He knew all that, but they were here anyway with the faint hope that Lapis’s money might loosen Chuck’s lips. The thief had a stronger sense of duty than he’d anticipated.

Indeed, Loren had already given up when Chuck leaned in over the table and brought his face close. “But you know,” he whispered, “I do owe you for saving Nym. I might just sing a few bars if you promise you never heard it from me.”

“We won’t cause you any trouble. That’s a promise.”

“The same goes for me, Mr. Chuck.”

Chuck examined their faces and confirmed their intentions. Then he dropped his voice even lower. “It’s up to you to decide whether it’s all true or not. I’m just gonna say what I know,” he prefaced. “First up, that girl you brought in’s a certain Scena Lombardia of Hansa.”

Loren failed to comprehend a single word of this. He looked to Lapis, who whispered back, “The city-state Hansa is a small country centered around the city of Hansa, which is a three-day wagon ride south of Kaffa. I do not know who ‘Scena’ is, but their head of state is from House Lombardia.”

“You’re pretty knowledgeable.”

“Hee hee... Praise me more, why don’t you?” she said, preening.

Leaving Lapis to her fantasies, Loren urged Chuck further.

It seemed Chuck had come to a similar decision, keeping Lapis out of his field of vision and focusing only on Loren as he went on. “Scena’s the chancellor’s only daughter. Now, that doesn’t make her particularly important, but I’d say she’s just around that sweet spot where you probably shouldn’t treat her poorly.”

If this Scena was the daughter of someone who led a nation—small as it was—the adventurers’ guild had to be careful with how they handled her. But, when all was said and done, there was little to be gained from the good graces of a small nation three days away. The whole story left Loren with a sense of something fishy afoot.

“I don’t see why that means we had to be locked down for bringing her in,” he said.

“That’s an easy one. They didn’t want you to go out blabbing. Think about it like this. A little miss from a well-to-do house was thrown into the forest by her lonesome. If they left you to your own devices, you’d be swarmed by rumormongers who’d take the story in all sorts of directions.”

The niceties of such matters were lost on Loren, but he could nod and say that was probably how things worked. The way he saw it, people with status like kings and nobles too often took actions far beyond his comprehension. If he got bogged down trying to understand every single one of them, he’d never get anywhere at all. Thus, to him, it was wiser to simply not think about it.

“Normally, there’s a bit of a reward when you help someone out too, yeah?” said Chuck. “The reason you two didn’t get jack is, well, first off, because no one asked you to do it. Second is because we don’t know if that girl’s really Scena yet.”

“You mean to say they couldn’t confirm her identity over the course of two days?” Lapis sounded somewhat amazed.

Chuck shrugged. “Don’t ask me. Guild investigation says she at least looks the part, but the messengers they sent to Hansa haven’t come back—aren’t

coming, more like.”

Now that’s strange. Loren tilted his head. They had brought the girl in two days prior, and even if the guild immediately dispatched messengers, they would barely be halfway to Hansa by now. How *could* the messengers have returned yet?

Lapis answered that one. “This matter isn’t limited to the guild. The messengers of any organization that grows beyond a certain scale are fitted with enchanted items that periodically send signals. I presume those signals disappeared.”

“The guild’s thinkin’ this through. Our relationship with Hansa ain’t that important, but we wouldn’t want to make ’em angry either. That said, they called out to a few higher-ranking adventurers and arranged for a few parties to escort the girl back home. A quest to return her to Hansa, in short. Below a silver’s pay grade, mind you,” Chuck added around a mouthful of ale.

While the whole affair centered on someone of somewhat high stature, Hansa’s relationship with the adventurers’ guild was dicey at best. This meant that not only was the quest payment quite low, it would be an annoying job that required keeping the girl being escorted in a good mood. Even if success meant getting the favor of Hansa, that apparently wasn’t too valuable once one had risen to silver rank.

“A bit of a shame,” said Loren. “Didn’t really sound too secret after all.”

“Pretty much. But it’s still official business. I wouldn’t spread the word to just anyone. The reason the guild didn’t want to tell you is because there’s no place for coppers in this one.”

“What would we have to do if we wanted to poke our heads in?” Lapis asked.

This sudden proclamation made Loren and Chuck exchange a glance. Chuck looked tired and Loren a tad apologetic, having had a hunch that Lapis would do this.

“What, you guys got some skin in this?” Chuck asked.

“No. You know, she’s just curious.”

“Precisely,” said Lapis. “We have here a noble girl who should have been living without a care in a country three days away. Now, what was she doing in the middle of a forest alone? I want to know. In fact, I want to know so badly I don’t know what to do with myself.”

Lapis declared this forcefully, though Loren had to wonder what part of the story had enticed her so. That said, there was one thing he knew for certain.

“They’re not recruiting for coppers,” he said.

“Then perhaps we can get in through some loophole,” she countered.

“A loophole? How do you expect to—”

“Hey, I know one, for what it’s worth,” Chuck said.

“Seriously?” Loren retorted, feeling quite powerless.

“There’s a standard exception. If you’ve got the recommendation of a silver or higher, a copper can be treated the same as an iron in some quests.”

“Even if we are the right rank, doesn’t change that they’re not offering us the job.”

“Yeah, but *we* got the offer,” said Chuck. There was just a bit of pride in those words. Loren narrowed his eyes, but Chuck seemed to have trouble pinning down what that look meant. “And by we, I mean Ritz. With Ritz’s permission and our recommendations, we could push this one to you guys.”

“That sounds wonderful!” said Lapis. “Please, if you would—”

Loren clapped a hand over Lapis’s mouth before she could latch on. Her glare made clear her will to rebel, but he shut her down with that very same look.

Sure, Chuck had made recommendations sound like the easiest thing in the world, but Loren knew it couldn’t be so simple. If an endorsed individual failed, it lowered the reputation of the endorser as well.

“I don’t see a problem,” Chuck insisted. “Ask Ritz, and I’m sure he’ll say the same.”

“Still.”

“Look, I’m not putting any pressure on you. Take it or leave it. Just saying the

offer's open. It's only..." Chuck cut himself off, scanning every inch of Loren's body. When Loren stared at him blankly, he spoke apologetically. "Yeah, there's no two ways about it. You'd need a proper weapon first."

Of course, Chuck understood Loren's situation, as he'd been there when Loren lost his blade. And while he had confidence in Loren's sword skills, he would still hesitate to give a recommendation when the man had no sword.

Once he inferred that much, Loren realized that he could quite naturally weasel his way out of all of this trouble if he just failed to produce a weapon. He opened his mouth, fully intending to bring up his lack of funds to replace it, only to stumble over his words as he took in Lapis's blank, half-lidded glare from the neighboring seat.

"Err, no... I mean, well."

Silence.

"You get it, don't you, Lapis? You know the spot I'm in."

Silence.

"Sorry, Chuck, I'll have my gear in order tomorrow. Could you tell 'im that?"

Ultimately, Loren lost to Lapis's silent pressure.

Chuck winced. "Have some backbone, man. She's got you under her thumb."

"Shut it. I don't need you reminding me."

"Well, knowing you, you'll probably have it taken care of in a day. I'll push things forward. Don't worry, there ain't a single silver up for the job. They'll gladly take anyone we recommend."

"Yeah, please do. On that note, Lapis."

"Yes?" Now that everything had gone her way, Lapis's intimidating aura had vanished.

Loren forced out the words he least wanted to say. "Lend me some money."

Increasing debt never felt good, but it had to be done. If he wasn't properly equipped, he would only be able to take on jobs involving his bare fists. *If I'm gonna borrow, he concluded, I'd better do it while I still have the chance.*

“Equipment?” she asked. “Are you going to buy a sword?”

“Wouldn’t want to bother Chuck and his party otherwise.”

“Hmm...” Something seemed to occur to her at that moment, and she asked, “Mr. Chuck, around when will we have to depart for that quest?”

“I don’t know the details. Wasn’t set in stone yet, last I checked, seeing as they have to take that Scena girl’s condition into account and all. But three days from now at earliest.”

After hearing that, Lapis counted something on her fingers. Soon, she reached her conclusion and turned to Loren. “I’m sorry, Mr. Loren. I have no issue with lending you money, but would it be possible to wait a day?”

“Well, sure... I’m the one borrowing. I’ll wait if you tell me to.”

“You’ll need a large sword like your previous one, won’t you? In that case, I feel my current funds will not be adequate. I’ll have to liquidate some of my assets.”

Loren already knew he wouldn’t be able to get anything like what he had before, and he was somewhat miserable about it. It was hard to think such a massive item would be regularly stocked no matter where he went. If possible, he wanted to find something as close to his lost blade as he could, but even that would be difficult, and he expected some compromises were in order. He nodded, nevertheless.

“I’ll have to get right on it. Pardon me, but I really must be off.” Lapis bowed, slowly and smoothly, before leaving the store in a haste.

Loren saw her off and considered following, but Chuck called him back before he had left his seat. “No need to hurry, not like you got anything better to do, right? How about you stick around?”

“Well, why not.”

He could try plotting out what equipment to buy, but that wouldn’t get far when he didn’t know how much Lapis would lend. In that case, he had some time to burn. He brought his half-empty mug to his mouth and then nearly spat it all out with Chuck’s next words.

“We’ve both got it tough. Falling in love with weirdos.”

“Where did you get that from?”

This had come far too suddenly; Loren inadvertently failed to put any emotion into his response. Chuck, on the other hand, nodded again and again as if he had seen through everything.

“I get it, I get it. I get it, I tell ya. Can’t say I’m any better off. That Nym, she’s always dragging me left and right, but I guess they meant it when they said love is blind.”

Loren spent the time he took to wipe away his spit take deep in thought. He had already seen hints of that relationship while working closely with Chuck and Nym, but it felt strangely awkward to hear it from the horse’s mouth.

“But, you know. Sure, I was her sofa for a minute, but I’ve been thinking. Being sat on by that scrawny arse weren’t too bad either.”

“You’d be a pincushion if she heard that.”

When it came to this sort of talk, there was no telling who might be listening. Loren’s warning came at least ten percent out of genuine concern, but this consideration was drowned out by the ale in Chuck’s hands.

“That sour look is part of Nym’s charm, you get me?”

“Goddamn drunk... What’s bragging to me gonna do for you?”

Chuck hugged himself now, squirming and twisting in drunken fervor. Loren nearly forgot that this was a man to whom he’d soon be indebted. He drove Chuck’s lovelorn moaning from his mind and ordered another drink from the passing waiter. If he was going to have to listen, he was damn well going to do it drunk.

The next morning, Loren woke up in a corner of the bar, shaking his head to drive away the drowse of a hangover. A considerable number of empty mugs rolled around the table, and across from him slumped Chuck. The thief had finally fallen into complete silence, asleep, his cheek nuzzled against the table.

What exactly happened after that? Loren wondered. But this brief thought

brought back Chuck's onslaught of meandering, besotted tales, and he held his head.

A fearsome man was Chuck. He had managed to continue moaning until both he *and* Loren were completely smashed. At first, Loren had thought it wouldn't be too bad to listen for a story or two in exchange for a cup, but the night grew long, the stories longer, and the whole experience quite painful. Eventually, the beer mugs had formed a tower, and he had abruptly stopped feeling anything anymore.

That was as far as Loren remembered. He couldn't recall whether he or Chuck had been the first to tap out. Before he realized it, he had been out cold against the back of the chair.

"Don't tell me you were here all night?"

Loren turned his sleepy eyes to a voice at the entrance. Lapis stepped in with the morning light. She wore the same clothes as she had when they parted. Upon walking over, she tapped Chuck on the shoulder to make sure he was out, and having lost interest in him, moved on to Loren.

"Yeah... Well, pretty much," Loren confessed.

"When I left yesterday, I did belatedly realize that we forgot to book a new inn."

"You're right. And we were supposed to check out of that place the guild got for us."

"I already took care of the paperwork and the heavy lifting. You hardly own anything, Mr. Loren, so it was over quickly enough."

Lapis said it so casually, and it took a bit of time for Loren's addled brain to understand. Once he swallowed the essence of her meaning, he glared. "How did you get in my room?"

"I said we were traveling companions. They just let me in."

Is that really all it takes? he wondered. But it was, after all, an inn the guild had introduced them to. And surely, on occasion, adventuring guests couldn't return to collect their belongings, so it would be inconvenient if they made the

process too complicated.

“I already booked a new inn, so no need to worry about that,” said Lapis.

“Sorry for the trouble.”

“I procured some money as well. Shall we go shopping? That’s what I’d like to say, at least, but...how are we going to pay for this?”

Lapis gestured to the sizable number of mugs piled high on the table. It had taken an equally hefty number of snacks to accompany all that alcohol, and it wasn’t difficult to see that the total cost had reached an exorbitant sum.

Loren had been under the impression that Chuck would pay for it. However, if the man in question was genuinely smashed, Loren couldn’t just throw him to the wind and leave. So there he stood, wondering what to do, when a savior arrived.

“There you are, Chuck.”

A single woman entered, as Lapis had before her, her silhouette highlighted by the morning sun. Both Loren and Lapis recognized her slender figure. As they hesitated over whether to warn Chuck, the individual suddenly kicked him in the back.

This made quite a racket. Surely that should be enough to wake him, both Loren and Lapis thought. But Chuck failed to react in the slightest. He continued to sleep on.

“Good day, Ms. Nym. It’s been too long,” said Lapis.

“Far too long. Though I feel it’s barely been any time at all.”

“Are you here for Mr. Chuck?”

“Yes. I am here for the good-for-nothing.”

“Ah, err.” Loren scratched the back of his head. “Don’t get the wrong idea, some of those mugs were mine.”

In the first place, he had been the one to come to the bar to hear Chuck out. Of course, Chuck had already been drinking before that, and he had continued drinking for reasons that had nothing to do with Loren.

Nym shut Loren up with a fixed stare. “You’re a good kid, Loren.” To Lapis, she said, “You should learn from him.”

“Are you saying I’m a bad kid, then?” asked Lapis.

“You decide. Don’t worry about this one. I’ll tell Ritz he was trying to set a good example for his junior. The bill is on me.”

Nym stuck up her thumb. It was difficult to read her expression—in fact, it was nigh impossible to tell what was going through her head. Loren didn’t know if it was all right to simply leave, but as he stood motionless, Nym pushed him on the back to drive him out.



“You think we should apologize later?”

“I think we’ll be just fine. More importantly, Mr. Loren, do I really come off that badly?”

“Don’t ask me, please...”

For some reason, Lapis seemed bothered with this assessment. Not that it mattered to Loren, who set off for the town’s shopping district as previously arranged.

Sure, the area could be described as a shopping district, but it didn’t carry any of the townsfolk’s daily necessities. It specialized in merchandise for adventurers, and one such district could be found in any decently sized settlement. Lapis had already done her research and had picked out a few promising shops in advance. Loren entered the first under her guidance.

“In the end, it all comes down to weapons and armor. An adventurer wouldn’t be caught dead without them,” she said, directing him to just such wares.

Quite a spectacle awaited. The walls of the first shop were jam-packed with various weapons, while the shelves were similarly crammed with armors of differing sizes and materials.

At first, Loren tried gesturing at the leather armor he already wore, but Lapis shook her head. “The way you fight puts you on the receiving end of quite a few attacks. You should consider something sturdier.”

Really? He had a hard time picturing himself in full plate. Not that he’d ever worn it before, but he felt it would get in the way of his movements and prevent him from fighting properly.

That said, reinforced leather armor was a bit of a puzzler too, being an incredible pain to maintain. The mercenary company had mainly supplied him with armor that was simple to look after and easy to replace.

“This is what I would recommend. I think it would suit you perfectly, Mr. Loren.”

What Lapis held up to his eye level wasn’t armor at all. It was, instead, a coat with long sleeves. Loren furrowed his brow, not knowing what to make of it.

Lapis was all too eager to explain. “It may look like any other coat, but lo and behold: this one is enchanted. The cloth is woven from layer upon layer of black spider silk. It’s an incredible bargain—a mere five gold for the piece.”

“Well, you’ve started from an outrageous baseline.”

“A coat like this, imbued with both *Protect* and *Autorecovery*, would *usually* go for ten times that. You’ll raise your defense to a new level just by wearing it over your leather. We simply must buy it.”

“Ten times—wait, do the store people know about this?”

If Lapis was to be believed, this discrepancy would put the store deeply in the red. Forty-five gold was a mind-numbing amount to Loren, and he was assailed by intense guilt at the mere thought of passing the loss on to a hapless shop.

Lapis dexterously rolled the coat up into a tidy square and shoved it at him. “It’s the store’s fault for not noticing. I fail to see the problem.”

“Not helping.”

Loren glanced at the white-haired old man behind the counter. The man, presumably the shopkeeper, stared straight back at him, and while their conversation hadn’t been notably loud, he couldn’t shake the feeling they had been overheard.

“Is the cat out of the bag yet?” he whispered.

“We’re fine, totally fine. Even if he heard us, we need only buy it before he has the chance to fix the price. See, it even has a tag.”

There was, indeed, a tag that valued the coat at five gold. The price tag looked strangely new, and Loren had to ask himself whether this was really all right. However, Lapis paid him no heed and turned on her heel to set off searching for the next item she had in mind.

“What’s this?” she said, looking the wall up and down. “How peculiar. There was one I had my eye on, but...” She called out to the shopkeeper. “Good sir, do you know where it went? Don’t tell me someone else bought it.”

“Who the hell would buy something like that? It was too idiotically large to keep in the shop, so I put it in the back.”

“I’m surprised you managed to move it.”

“That’s my line. I mean, lass, how in the name of any god did you—ahem. It took a few people to get it there.”

“Is that so? Then could you get it out?”

“Wait here. It’s going to take a while.”

With that, the shopkeeper and Lapis disappeared into the back. Loren was abandoned, holding the coat and feeling rather left out. He decided to have a look around until the two of them returned.

The store wasn’t that large, but it boasted a surprising variety of wares. There was never a dull moment for his eyes. For now, he hadn’t a single coin in his wallet and he was buying what he needed through debt, but once he had some spending money, this would be a good place to search for a sidearm. He told himself he was better off remembering the shop’s location when his eyes suddenly stopped on a shelf in the corner. He zeroed in on a single sword leaned against it.

A longsword beside a black, ornamented scabbard, its hilt similarly wrapped in black leather and adorned here and there with gold and silver. In the dimness of the store, its straight blade looked as if it had been slathered in liquid light.

Loren didn’t have much experience wielding normal longswords, but the edge of this one so enticed him that he knew he had to hold it once. As his hand reached for it, another hand came in from the side and stole the sword from right under his nose.

“I’ve already got my eyes on this one. It’s not a piece a muscle-head like you could master.”

Loren was more surprised than anything at this sudden insult, but he made sure it didn’t reach his face as he turned. Beside him stood a lone boy.

The boy looked at least a little younger than Loren. His hair was a blazing red, while his brown eyes gleamed with determination. Though he wore the clothing of a commoner, a black, iron tag dangled from his neck. “Not to mention it’s beyond what a copper could afford,” the kid said. “Know your place.”

Do I really have to put up with this kind of lip from some kid? Loren wondered, but he maintained his silence. He got the feeling that replying would just make this even more of a pain. He had just been a little curious, and it wasn't as if he yearned for the blade in any real way.

Taking Loren's silence to mean he'd won the argument, the boy scoffed—mockingly, like a child—and triumphantly made off to the counter to pay for his prize. He arrived just as the shopkeeper emerged. Loren watched out of the corner of his eye as the boy paid, because Lapis had marched boldly up to him with a sizable bundle in her hands.

"Did something happen while I was gone?" she asked.

"Nothing noteworthy."

"Oh? Was that longsword sold? That one was, well, it was decent. But I guarantee it's nothing compared to the first-class piece I prepa—that I discovered by complete chance."

"Can't you even get your story straight? Well, I get the feeling I'm profiting here, so I'm not prodding too deep."

"Prodding too deep? How uncouth of you, Mr. Loren." She chuckled—in a rather vulgar way, at that.

Loren lowered a light knuckle on her head before taking the parcel and unraveling it.

"Now this is..." It took only one look at the piece to summon his longing sigh.

Chapter 2:

An Increase to an Elucidation

THE QUEST WAS, in short, to deliver Scena Lombardia to Hansa. A meeting of the adventurers taking part in the quest would be held the day after Loren had readied his equipment. They heard about this from Chuck the moment they returned to the inn Lapis had booked.

The shopping venture ended up raising Loren's debt to Lapis by a considerable amount: fifty silver for one new set of leather armor. Five gold for the black coat Lapis recommended. An additional fifteen gold for the weapon Lapis chose. Added on to this, an assortment of salves and a dagger just in case. Also, the tools and bags needed to maintain equipment, along with plenty of preserved food and clothing. Anything an adventurer might ever need.

"Adding that on to your current total—oh, fine, I'll throw in a slight discount. Forget about the copper coins. Let's say you're at twenty-three gold and eighty silver."

"That's more than my life's savings there."

"An adventurer's equipment is what's saving his life. What were you expecting?"

The pair had quarreled as they paid the somber-faced shopkeeper. In any case, Loren was finally sufficiently equipped to fight as an adventurer.

As for the meeting, Loren thought it rather sudden when he first heard about it. The night before, he changed their double bed booking at the inn to two single rooms, parted from a discontented Lapis, and in the morning, he accompanied her to the adventurers' guild.

On arrival, they gave Ritz's name and introduced themselves as the adventurers who would partake in the request at his party's recommendation.

They were redirected to a room to meet the client—a guild receptionist—as well as the girl they had extracted from the forest. The girl was out of her white

dress, now properly outfitted for travel. With them were the roughly twenty iron-rank adventurers taking part in the quest. Given the size of a standard party, that meant a handful of different parties would be working together.

Loren noted that the red-haired boy who had snatched the longsword from right under his nose was among them. The boy seemed to notice Loren at practically the same time; he pointed at the copper tag hanging from Loren's chest and called out to the receptionist.

"Hey. Wasn't this quest limited to iron and up?"

"Those two are joining under the recommendation of some silver-rank adventurers."

"Cronyism, eh?" The boy sneered, looking straight at Loren. The black longsword hung from his hip. His armor was chainmail reinforced with sheet metal—quite an intricate piece.

"By guild regulation, a copper-rank adventurer may be treated as an iron-rank with the recommendation of a member at rank silver or higher. The guild has no issue with their participation in this quest," the receptionist explained to pacify the other adventurers eyeing the newcomers.

Loren cracked a faint smile; he realized he couldn't really deny the nepotism.

That gesture rubbed the red-haired boy the wrong way, though. He promptly pointed at Loren's chest. "I told you yesterday, you need to learn your place. I don't know how you cozied up with silver-rank adventurers, but you'd better take care not to get in the way."

Being a copper-rank adventurer as well, Lapis had every right to feel just as challenged. However, she seemed entirely uninterested in anything the boy had to say. She simply observed the exchange, looking if anything a little irritated at the holdup.

Seeing no other way out of it, Loren reluctantly engaged. "Yeah, you got that right. We'll be in the corner keeping a low profile."

"Not even going to defend yourself?"

What am I supposed to do with this guy? Loren shrugged.

Thankfully, the guild receptionist stepped in. “Leave it at that, would you? You’re comrades on the same quest.”

“Don’t put us in the same boat.”

“If you don’t stop now, I’ll be forced to conclude that you intend to hinder the quest’s progress, and the guild will have to penalize you,” the receptionist warned.

The boy finally shut his mouth. He sent a glare toward Loren before receding to the part of the room where his comrades presumably waited.

“The same goes for you two,” said the receptionist. “Please give some thought to the fact that you’re an exception. We wouldn’t want to regret putting that special rule in place.”

“Yeah, sorry about that. I’ll keep it in mind.”

Once Loren lowered his head, it seemed that was the end of the matter. The receptionist turned, taking a good look at all the participants and then raised her voice ever so slightly. “Our thanks to everyone who expressed their desire to take part in this expedition. If you’re unaware, this is to be considered an official guild quest. You are to deliver Scena Lombardia here to the city-state of Hansa.”

The young blonde girl that the receptionist indicated surveyed the line of adventurers with somewhat fearful eyes—though at the receptionist’s prompting, she lowered her head.

“Scena is the daughter of Hansa’s chancellor. I ask that you treat her courteously. Hansa is about a three-day wagon ride away, and we will be preparing the wagon. We ask that you guard the wagon along the way. The reward is twelve silver a head.”

Loren took that to be quite a hefty sum—that is, until he realized it covered a six-day round trip. That meant he would be paid two silver a day. The cost of living for an average grown adult was roughly fifty copper, and as such, the reward wasn’t anything spectacular.

“Hold up. You’re telling me those two coppers are making the same as us?” asked a different adventurer—not the cranky redhead. “Don’t you reckon it

should be lower?”

“As far as the quest is concerned, they will be treated no different from iron-ranks. That means equal payment as well.”

“You’re kidding me. I’m already having a tough time accepting these complete amateurs are coming with us. Now you’re saying they’re worth just as much as us? Hey, you, say something!” the adventurer snarled, a vein popping on his brow.

Loren tilted his head. “Something? Well what d’you want me to say?”

“Go on, tell ’em, ‘We’ll take half, so give the other half of our share to the irons,’ eh? Can’t you understand that?”

Loren stood silently as the man approached him, still snarling. A part of him did understand where the man was coming from, but he had neither the duty nor the obligation to go out of his way to comply with a fellow behaving like this. That said, he could think of no easy means of silencing the disgruntled man.

As Loren idly considered his options, Lapis spoke up. “Ah, but if our participation is in compliance with guild regulations, we have no reason to give up half of our promised reward.”

The man shifted from Loren to Lapis, lips peeled back in a growl. “What’d you say, wench? Say it again, I dare ya!”

Then the man reached toward her—but his efforts were in vain. Loren intercepted his wrist halfway to its target.

“What? You wanna go?!”

What was it Lapis said? Loren thought. So long as nobody got killed, quarrels between adventurers could be written off as self-defense, especially if the other man started it. As Loren’s opponent grappled to free his hand, Loren slowly increased the pressure of his grip, staring straight into his eyes with a smile.

“Wh-what are you doin’...you, you!”

The adventurer wore leather bracers, yet the point of his arm where Loren squeezed let off an ugly sound, like a wet rag being torn in two. The man’s face

paled. He yelped, his expression contorting in pain.

Loren wielded what was, essentially, a giant hunk of iron. While his arm strength was self-evident, without additional grip strength, he would never be able to keep such a sword on course. This grip was now on the verge of crushing a man's bracer, muscle, and bone altogether.

"Dammit... L-Let go, you piece of—"

Struggle as he might, the adventurer couldn't free his arm. Even worse, bit by bit, the unsettling noises coming from it grew stronger. This would, if he did nothing, turn disastrous. In a panic, he gave up reclaiming his arm and used his free hand to grasp the hilt of the shortsword hanging at his waist.

Loren saw this. He shook the man by the wrist. This small, nonchalant motion on his part sent the adventurer flying straight into the wall before his weapon was out of its sheath. The man collided with a damp, bone-juddering thud before collapsing to the floor.



The adventurer was by no definition a waif. On top of a large, stalwart build, he was weighed down by all his adventuring gear. By flinging the man with one hand—seemingly effortlessly—Loren had demonstrated his caliber far better than he could with words.

“It’s fine as long as he’s not dead, right? Anyone else got a bone to pick? Otherwise, could we get on with the story?”

Half the adventurers looked pointedly away; the other half seemed somewhat impressed. On closer inspection, they saw that Loren carried a bundle on his back just about as tall as he was. Even if the adventurers didn’t know what was inside of it, they could assume it was his weapon. Every adventurer who had initially suspected the bundle to be some sort of bluff could now easily imagine him having the strength to handle something so massive.

His skills were still a mystery, but his pure physical might far surpassed those of most—if not all—iron-ranks. Evidently, no one else wanted to find out.

“Continuing on, we have already sent a few messengers from Kaffa to Hansa,” said the receptionist. “As you might imagine, we wished to inform the chancellor that we had his daughter under our care. However, we have been unable to confirm whether any of them reached their destination.”

This implied something dangerous lurked along the way. It also meant that, despite the guild’s best efforts to ensure the message got through, not a single one of their men had managed to succeed. What exactly lay in store for them? How treacherous was this trek? Each team would have to make the call for themselves.

Even so, one adventurer raised a hand. “You’re offering chump change with that level of risk?”

“At present, we have not established exactly what the risk *is*. However, we have prepared additional compensation for any inordinate trouble. I promise that whoever encounters and deals with this problem will be paid in accordance with the liability entailed.”

A few eyes lit up at that, though others grimaced and grew restless. They understood what the receptionist was really saying: Not only did they foresee a

high chance of the escort party colliding with this unknown threat, whoever wanted additional payment would have to collect evidence of its defeat to present to the guild.

“Backtracking a little, I must reiterate that this is an official guild quest issued by the Kaffa branch. It is possible to decline, but that may come with certain penalties. Furthermore, should you succeed, you will earn certain guild benefits along with the reward. Please make your final call with that in mind.”

For the first time, Scena opened her mouth, lowering her head to the gathered. “Please, won’t you take me to my home? I cannot offer a reward here where I stand, but I swear I will inform my father of this debt.”

I know I have to stick with Lapis, thought Loren. But that’s not all the skin we’ve got in the game. Now that Ritz has given his recommendation, there’s no way in hell we’re getting out of this quest.

While he observed the other adventurers debating with each other, Lapis began reading through the contract they received. Loren hadn’t taken escort quests before. The folks who posted them were usually powerful or rich—high-class in some regard. The way he saw it, there was no reason for someone like that to associate with a crude and violent mercenary by choice, though he wasn’t that knowledgeable on the matter.

As he knew nothing about this sort of thing, he was sure Scena would be the only one in a wagon while the adventurers formed a perimeter and walked around it. He only realized he was mistaken when he saw the guild had booked three wagons.

“We get to ride?” he asked.

“It would take more than three days if we had to guard on foot,” said Lapis.

That wasn’t to say the wagons were any kind of grand. Just wagons with cloth canopies. Still, Loren found himself impressed by the guild’s competence. They’d prepared enough wagons to carry every single adventurer who accepted—which was nearly everyone.

Incidentally, *nearly everyone* referred to the fact that the adventurer Loren had slammed into a wall had been forced to drop out. Loren worried the man’s

comrades might try something, but in the end they had the discretion to follow the tacit rule—all squabbles between adventurers were justified so long as no one died. While Loren couldn't read their minds, they didn't antagonize him.

"Still, that's a lifesaver," he said. Sure, Loren had plenty of stamina from training to shoulder the weight on his back, but he didn't want to waste it on more bickering.

"I'm more amazed you can march while lugging that around, Mr. Loren."

"You just have to get used to it. Same with most things in life," Loren said as he hopped onto the wagon.

There he ran into his first problem. The moment he took a seat at one of the two benches facing each other, his weapon completely threw off the wagon's center of balance—not to mention it took up quite a bit of space.

"There isn't much we can do about that. We'll have to take up one side, you and I," said Lapis. "The others will have to squeeze into the opposite bench."

The guild intended to have eight people in each wagon, with twenty-three adventurers taking part and the last seat reserved for Scena. If Lapis and Loren took up one bench, that left six people squeezing into a seat meant for four—which did, admittedly, balance out the weight. However, the extra space made Loren feel even more confined. He was already a lower-ranking copper adventurer, and now the iron-ranks were eyeing him sharply.

"I'm real sorry. I don't have anything to say for myself," he said to them.

This one was most certainly his fault. He lowered his head in earnest apology. The adventurers initially appeared to be taken aback by his sincerity, but given a moment, they seemed to accept it.

"Nothing you can do about it," the oldest one grunted.

"I'm in your debt," Loren replied, and that was the end of it.

Yet just as one problem was resolved, the next one arrived. The red-haired boy—who was supposed to be riding elsewhere—boarded their wagon. The boy had seemingly foreseen Loren taking up more space than he deserved and stormed over to ask him what he was so proud of. As Loren raised his head

from his apology, the boy snorted.

“Oi, small fry!” he declared. “Not only have you failed to learn your place, now you’re troubling the other adventurers! Just how far do you intend to drag us down?!”

Loren placed a hand over Lapis’s face to mask the murderous glint in her eyes. Sure, he also took issue with how and when the boy was saying this, but his words were fundamentally not untrue. Loren didn’t feel like rebutting them either.

The boy knew it too. He opened his mouth to drive the point home, only to be interrupted by the irritable snarl of the elder adventurer.

“Piss off, brat! We’re already past that! Get back to your wagon!”

The boy’s mouth remained blankly open, but no words came out. A few women—presumably his comrades—arrived to retrieve him and frantically dragged him back to where he belonged.

Loren took the opportunity to observe the boy’s party structure. A woman in splendid plate armor whose long blonde hair didn’t know the first thing about curving. A younger girl with freckles and curly brown hair, who carried a wood staff and wore a deep blue robe. A girl in mostly white priest vestments with a short mace in one hand, whose aqua hair was cut short in a bob.

“Are one-man, three-women parties the latest craze or something?” he asked, recalling the first party he’d joined not too long ago.

“The knight-looking one is Leila,” Lapis whispered to Loren, his hand still over her eyes. “The magician-ish one is Ange, and I think the priest was called Laure or something. She serves the god of water, if I’m remembering right.”

“How do you know all that?”

“I saw the registry at the guild. By the way, that red-haired kid is Claes. A young and highly sought after adventurer.”

“Sought after? Who in their right mind would want *him*?”

But Lapis had said this without a hint of irony, which led Loren to believe Claes had some sort of sponsor.

“For now, it seems like it’s the adventurers’ guild itself,” she said. “Though I didn’t have time to find out what the guild sees in him. I’ll need to look into it further.”

Loren didn’t know whether to be more surprised that Claes had such a powerful sponsor or that Lapis was so nonchalant about digging into some else’s situation. He ultimately decided to keep quiet.

“Incidentally, the elderly gentleman here is Mr. Brosse. He is a veteran who has been an adventurer for twenty years.”

“Yeah, yeah, say what you want,” said Brosse. “I’ve been at this for twenty years, and I’m still an iron. Right laugh, ain’t it?”

“Perish the thought,” said Lapis. “Only a handful of adventurers ever reach silver. I can only imagine what we have to learn from a man whose skills have allowed him to remain in such a dangerous industry for so many years without major injury.”

This time, Loren couldn’t contain his surprise. Lapis had said something completely inoffensive. He finally released her—and she grabbed at his collar, her liberated eyes demanding to know where this genuine shock was coming from.

Their exchange, however, somehow softened the air with the other adventurers. Brosse crossed his arms, clicked his tongue, and turned away.

“Oh? Don’t be shy.” Lapis smiled.

“*Shy*—ah, whatever. Just sit there and shut your yap.”

It wasn’t unusual for an adventurer to be rough around the edges, and in fact, Brosse was surprisingly good-natured for the trade. Loren lowered his head once more. “You saved us there, thank you.”

“And you pipe down too. Mind your own business and keep flirting with that young thing next to you.” Brosse shooed Loren away with a hand, making it very clear the conversation was over. Saying any more would have been rude.

Loren held Lapis back before she could say anything else and whispered into her ear. “So, I guess Ritz’s party was pretty amazing.”

“Amazing enough to slip coppers among irons.”

The point was, they were hitching a ride on the coattails of their former comrades’ prowess.

“Making connections with amazing people is a talent in itself, you know?” Lapis beamed.

“I get it, I get it. Can’t you sit still for one minute?”

He knew he couldn’t win against her with words. Just as he raised the white flag, the wagon that housed Scena slowly started down the highway.

“Hey, there somethin’ off here?” Loren asked. The wagon behind them had come to an abrupt halt.

As this would be a three-day wagon journey, they planned to make camp for at least two nights. The guild hadn’t hired specialists to drive—they were run-of-the-mill folk who didn’t have the training to drive through the night. The whole train would come to a stop at sunset. This early pause was unexpected.

Their formation was such that their client always rode in the center—sandwiched between the other two wagons ahead and behind, with Loren and Lapis in the one up front. However, something seemed strange about the driver of the wagon behind them.

“Oi, you all right?” Loren asked as he approached.

The driver of Scena’s wagon let out an off-kilter breath, wiping the sweat from his brow with a pained look on his face.

“What happened?”

“N-nothing happened, but I’m not feeling well.”

When they left Kaffa, all three drivers had been healthy young men. However, this man’s complexion had taken a turn, like he had come down with some sickness. Sweat slid down his face, drop by drop.

“Did you come into contact with anyone in your wagon?” Loren asked.

“Th-they should be fine...” While the driver stuttered, it didn’t seem like he

was hiding anything. He really and truly wasn't feeling well.

"Hey, kid. What are you doing?" Brosse asked, coming up as well.

Loren pointed at the driver. "He's ill."

"What? ...Oi, you lot! Forget about camp, come spread a sheet!"

The moment he saw the driver's face, Brosse called out to his party members, then climbed up to the driver's perch and lowered his body to the road. Loren helped him out when Claes came out of the wagon in the back.

"What are you doing, lowlife?!"

"Lapis, could you check inside the wagon?" Loren asked, ignoring the boy. "If I recall rightly, it's all women to ensure the client's safety."

"That was the arrangement, yes. Fine, leave it to me." Lapis climbed up the wagon side and stuck her head under the canvas.

"Oi, you! Answer my question," Claes snapped.

"Don't really got time for you," Loren muttered.

"What?!"

With all the noise Claes was making, Loren considered silencing him—then Lapis's voice snapped him back to his senses. "Big trouble, Mr. Loren! Have a look!"

"Out of the way." Loren brushed Claes aside and moved to Lapis, who had thrown the canopy wide open for all to see. The sight that awaited made him swallow his breath. "The hell is this? What happened here?"

Scena was still there in her traveling gear. She had sunk deep in her seat, her back slumped against the wall. Her rhythmic breaths indicated she was sound asleep—perhaps from fatigue. That wasn't particularly surprising, nor was it the issue.

There were seven female adventurers riding alongside her, and every single one of them was now sweating and just as pale as the driver. Some sat there in a daze, while others had crumpled to the floor, unable to manage even that.

This was downright bizarre, no matter how you looked at it. Loren called out

to Brosse, who was busy examining the driver.

“Brosse! Help me out here!”

“Quit your yapping, what’s the—oi, oi, the hell’s all this?” Brosse cried out.

It was such an unprecedented and disturbing sight that it left the other adventurers standing stock-still, paralyzed. Fine then. Manners had no place here. Loren hopped in and began unloading the bodies of the blank-eyed, listless women.

“Hmm? Hmmm? But what could it be...?” Lapis groaned from her place to the side of the area where the adventurers were setting up camp.

A tarp had been spread out, and the driver and the adventurers who’d been guarding Scena were laid upon it. At this point, not a single one was conscious, and agony wracked every face. Having proclaimed that medicine was a part of her priestly knowledge, Lapis was examining them. Her words and expression told Loren he should prepare for bad news.

He couldn’t contain his shudder as he recalled carrying the women out of the wagon. When he held them, he had found their bodies shockingly cold. Loren had seen and touched his fair share of corpses as a mercenary, both those of enemies and of his allies. Having encountered so many cadavers, he was well versed in that kind of chill. These bodies had been far colder.

It was so off-putting that he hardly even registered Claes clinging to one of them and bawling his eyes out.

Are they even alive? Loren wondered and timidly brought himself to ask, “How is it?”

“We’ve lost two of them.” Her reply was dreadfully brief. In fact, Lapis said it so easily that for a moment he wondered if he had heard wrong. But seeing the other adventurers look just as startled, he knew it wasn’t just him.

“Dead?”

“Yes. The cause of death is as yet unknown. But they are not breathing, and their hearts have stopped beating.” Lapis pointed out two of the female

adventurers. They looked no different from the rest—eyes closed, not a twitch—but Lapis said they were dead, and Loren trusted her to know.

“You sure?” Brosse closed in. He had been overseeing the camp’s construction.

Brosse was most likely the oldest of the adventurers taking part this time around, and those in the profession knew well enough to honor seniority. Even those that weren’t Brosse’s party members listened to him without much complaint. Claes was the only one who mouthed off and refused to obey—and perhaps Brosse didn’t feel like forcing him. Claes’s party had been left to set up their own camp.

From Loren’s point of view, Brosse’s orders came from the knowledge of age, and this whole experience would be a lot easier if he just followed the man’s instincts. But everyone thought differently, and he wasn’t going to raise his voice over it.

“I’m certain,” said Lapis. “Do you want to check, Mr. Brosse?”

“Just in case. Let’s see here.” Brosse stooped down over one of the bodies Lapis indicated. He lightly touched the body’s wrist and pressed a finger against her neck. He was back on his feet in no time at all. “Yep, dead. No doubt about it.”

“Yes, they are completely and utterly dead.”

Did she really have to push the point? Loren thought.

Her next words blew his question away. “I recommend cremating them here.”

“Oh, really?”

Loren felt that Brosse’s surprise was well warranted. Every land had its own way of dealing with their dead. However, burial was standard practice, coffin or not. The cremations Lapis suggested weren’t completely out of the question, but the regions that practiced such customs oftentimes did so only after some major event had taught them it was absolutely necessary.

“Right here?”

Loren was sure Brosse hadn’t considered bringing the dead with them, but

evidently that didn't mean he'd thought a burning was in order.

"If we aren't cremating them here, I recommend we hurry back to Kaffa," Lapis said indifferently.

"Why's that?"

"This is just a hunch of mine, but...those two are going to turn undead shortly."

Her warning disturbed all those who heard. *Turning undead* referred to when a corpse became a certain kind of monster—zombies, ghouls, and the like. This happened for a variety of reasons. The influence of some magic, for example, or the curse of a high-ranking undead. Other times, the deceased's own obsession kept them in the world they should have departed.

"So it's come to that," Brosse muttered.

"If you doubt me, well, we have another priest. You could have her look into it."

Priests were specialists when it came to leading lost souls. It was hard to think that a disciple of the god of knowledge could be mistaken in her arcane assessment of such a thing, but if Lapis's claim strained belief, a second diagnosis wouldn't be hard to come by.

"Hey, keep our priest out of your—" Claes started the moment his comrade was brought up.

"Claes, it is a priest's duty to look after those who have lost their way. Please."

Claes's mouth was already half-open for another complaint, but the blue-haired priest, Laure, cut him off. She jogged up before anyone called for her and knelt by the body.

"Lord of water, my lord. Please show me the way." She drew a seal in front of her chest with her fingers, then closed her eyes to pray.

Loren found himself muttering, "How very priestly."

"Are you implying I'm not very priestly?" Lapis asked.

Loren stared off into the distance. He hadn't intended to say it in the first place, and he had no answers, neither for Lapis's question nor her glare.

Laure had finished her check-up by then. She rose and patted off her knees. "I see corruption budding in their bodies," she confirmed. "They will both become undead before long."

"This ain't good..." Brosse cursed. "Quite a pickle we've found ourselves in."

There was little that could be done about it. They would need to explain the situation to the two women's comrades, secure their belongings, and find a spot for cremation. The fire would need fuel enough to burn bodies as well.

Brosse complained under his breath about the additional work. But he clearly knew grumbling wouldn't get anyone anywhere, and after scratching his head, he quickly got to work.

They couldn't burn bodies by the camp. After some consoling of the bereaved adventurers, the two bodies were put to flame quite a distance away. Luckily, the sun had set, and their smoke wasn't too visible from the camp. Even so, watching the lapping tongues of flame redden the darkness from afar was not a pleasant sight, even for Loren.

"It's getting quite strange around here," Lapis muttered while laying out her sleeping bag in the tent they'd set up.

Loren nodded. He eyed Scena, sitting on a fallen tree alone in the center of camp. Even if the reasons were unclear, the driver and every adventurer who had shared a wagon with the girl had succumbed to a mysterious ailment. Two of them were dead. Understandably, the adventurers feared her.

However, the quest was to deliver Scena to Hansa, and they couldn't treat her poorly. She had a tent posted at the center of camp with all the other tents forming a circle around it. Nonetheless, she was clearly being kept at arm's length.

Loren thought it harsh to treat a girl barely more than ten in such a way. He resolved to ask a question—but Lapis replied before it escaped him. She was standing at his elbow before he even realized it.

“Do whatever you want, in my opinion,” she said.

“You don’t mind?” Loren asked, a little startled.

“I don’t. Is there any reason for me to stop you?” Lapis placed a hand on his forehead. She seemed to be trying to pet him, but it just tickled. “All I want is to have you with me for whatever I do. I hope you would make the same concessions for me. I have never intended to prevent you from doing anything.”

“That’s something at least.”

“So please, go ahead. Do what you must.” Lapis saw him off with a beaming smile.

Loren proceeded to walk up to the lonesome girl. “Hey, wanna eat with us?” he asked.

Scena, like the others, had been allotted rather bland preserved foods. Hard bread and dry meats that could be eaten without cooking—and she had left it all untouched, her head hung low. As she looked up from her seat, Loren felt a few eyes gathering on his back.

“Won’t taste any better eating alone,” he said.

“Um, no, that’s... I don’t have much of an appetite,” Scena timidly replied. Her eyes were incredibly wary; she seemed to think he was coming down on her for leaving her food untouched.

Do I really look that scary? Loren spread his arms to show he had no ill intent. “Well, y’know. Eat a bit, eh? Tomorrow’s another busy day.”

“Yes... But, um, won’t my company be troublesome for you?” The adventurers’ attitude toward Scena was so blatant that even as a ten-year-old girl she could infer her status in the group.

“Don’t mind it. My comrade said it’s all good.”

“R-really. Then...maybe I’ll indulge a bit.”

Scena rose, and Loren beckoned. Some looked on awkwardly, others looked a bit touched. And only one—namely Claes—made a fuss.

“I should have expected you coppers to have a knack for cozying up to big

shots,” he said. “I guess you’re trying to brownnose as much as possible, maybe get a little bonus at the end. There’s no other reason you’d get close to that—that—”

Time to shut him up, thought Loren. While he didn’t care what anyone said about him, he believed Scena was better off not hearing whatever came out of Claes's mouth next. With one hand, he grabbed the dead tree Scena had been sitting on and hoisted it up.

Yet before he was ready to throw it, something flew past his side at tremendous speed. Loren froze, log still in hand. His eyes were locked on Claes, who flew backward, having taken a blow to the face.

As Loren slowly set the log down, he noted that the unidentified flying object had been one of the many sticks gathered for firewood. He could tell Lapis had chucked it—who else could do so with such brute force?

Ange and Laure hurriedly raced up to Claes. Leila the knight glared at Lapis but quickly averted her eyes. A clear and deep-set fear had settled over the lady knight’s face.

“Lapis, is it safe to look at you yet?” Loren timidly asked. He had positioned his body to block Scena’s line of sight.

He got only the most innocently cheerful reply. “Why, there’s no problem whatsoever. Hurry and bring Miss Scena over.”

Scena looked up at Loren curiously, none the wiser. He placed a hand on her head, decided it was better not to know what exactly the knight had seen on Lapis’s face, and gave up thinking about it.



The next quarrel came as they prepared to depart the next day. The female adventurers who would have ridden in Scena's wagon refused to join her again.

Excluding the two adventurers who had died, Scena's escort and the driver all regained consciousness by morning. They had recovered enough to move on their own, but after hearing of the mysterious circumstances of their illness, they turned down their prized seats for the second leg of the journey.

No one blamed them for it. Two people had died just from riding on that wagon. There was no guarantee it wouldn't happen again and no telling who would be next.

That didn't mean they could leave their client on a wagon alone—that simply wasn't an option on an escort quest. Someone had to be ready to come to her aid the instant something untoward happened.

"What a pain," Brosse grumbled—not that he planned to ride with her.

Can't blame him either, Loren thought.

"In that case, how about we ride with her?" Lapis proposed, as if the idea had only just struck her.

"You sure about that?" Loren asked.

Lapis clapped her hands together like she was trying to imply this was a brilliant idea. For himself, Loren didn't mind as long as Lapis was up for it. Still, a touch of anxiety lingered, muddying his expression.

"We were perfectly fine last night," Lapis pointed out.

They had initially approached Scena due to reluctance to leave her by herself. After that, they had found themselves equally averse to abandoning her to sleep on her own—even if she would be surrounded by the other adventurers. After some consultation with Brosse, they had moved Scena's tent closer to their own.

Saying she had lost her appetite, Scena ultimately barely ate a thing, but she seemed to appreciate the consideration. She also seemed to enjoy the company. To Loren, her lack of appetite suggested she was taking this situation a lot harder than her appearance suggested, and he had done his best to strike

up conversation.

The night had passed in this way. As of yet, Loren hadn't fallen unconscious, nor did he feel ill. All the same, he hesitated.

"Or are you going to tell little Miss Scena to enjoy her trip alone?" Lapis asked.

"I...don't know." Loren thought for another moment. It wasn't that he wanted to leave Scena there anxious and abandoned—in fact, he would much rather avoid such a thing if he could. Ever since his company had fallen, Loren had experienced enough loneliness to grow sick of seeing anyone endure it.

"In that case, I think you should take one for the team," said Lapis. "Don't you?"

Ultimately, Loren lurched over to Brosse and made the proposal.

"Are you two gonna be okay?" the old hand asked.

"Reckon so," said Loren. "We spent a whole night close by the girl. Way I see it, the problem's not with her."

"Well, fine, if you're all right with it. It'd actually be a real burden off my shoulders. Doesn't matter the circumstances—leaving a client unsupervised is terrible for the reputation."

"Great. Are there enough seats in the other wagons for everyone?"

"Any folks who don't want to ride with her can put up with some cramped knees as recompense. Forget them. Anything happens, you tell me. Wouldn't want you collapsing on us too."

And with that, Brosse accepted the proposal. After all, none of the other adventurers were about to step up.

"Oh, it's you, Mister..." Scena greeted the two of them with a mix of surprise and delight.

Loren smiled and waved, putting her at ease as best as he could. Then he left her to Lapis and took a seat right behind the driver. From there, he could keep watch over the wagon and the driver's condition at the same time. Sure, the driver was back on his feet, but he hadn't completely recovered. It would be

trouble if he made a mistake and strayed off the path. This position also let Loren shout to the other wagons if he had to, and it gave him the appearance of the bodyguard of a high-class lady, which might deter unwelcome attention.

Not long after, the camp was packed up, and the caravan once more set off for Hansa.

“Be careful from here on!” Brosse shouted to his party members. A majority of the guild’s envoys had disappeared at the two-day mark.

“Are we going to be...all right?” The tension in the air made it all the way to Scena.

“It’s *quite* all right.” Lapis reassured her with a smile. “We have an incredibly skilled mercenary with us.”

“You talkin’ about me?” asked Loren.

“Who else is there, Mr. Cleaving Gale?”

“Well, I don’t know how to tell you this, but you’ve got the wrong guy.”

Lapis looked quite taken aback by this statement.

Loren scratched his head and was compelled to explain. “I get that a lot, sure. But think about it. How the hell would someone like me get a moniker like that?”

“Does that mean you’ve met the real Cleaving Gale?”

“Of course not. I’d be dead.”

Lapis put a finger to her chin for a short while and then looked at him with probing eyes. “Incidentally, Mr. Loren, has anyone ever told you you’re slow on the uptake?”

“Frequently, actually. What about it?”

“So that’s it. I see.” Lapis nodded with newfound understanding, earning her quite a confused look from Scena.

Whatever she’d learned from that, she didn’t seek to learn more. Loren set his focus back on the road, absentmindedly listening to the idle banter inside.

“It’s so uneventful, I’d say it’s a bit of a letdown,” Lapis exclaimed over a stifled yawn. Some time had passed since they had broken camp; it was nearly noon. Whatever they were keeping an eye out for never attacked. The journey proceeded steadily, and no one seemed ill after riding with Scena.

“It’s about time we find a spot to rest,” said the driver.

Loren chewed over this. *It’s already that time, eh?* he thought as his eyes caught sight of a few silhouettes down the path.

“Someone’s ahead of us.”

“Travelers, maybe?” said the driver.

Loren wasn’t so optimistic; he narrowed his eyes to focus.

He had noticed them from the center wagon, so of course, the front wagon had already seen them as well. A line of around ten-odd figures blocked the road. Perhaps they had yet to notice the wagons, as they showed no hint of getting out of the way, forcing the front wagon to slow down.

“Did something happen?” Lapis asked as theirs decelerated in turn.

Not that Loren had a clear grasp on the situation either. Soon, all three wagons had come to a complete stop, wary of the unmoving figures ahead. A handful of adventurers from the front wagon disembarked and approached the line.

“The hell are you, and what’re you doin’ here?”

“Oi, can’t you tell you’re blocking the way?”

Armed adventurers shouting in gruff tones would usually be enough to startle the standard band of travelers, but the shadows didn’t move.

Loren left Scena to Lapis and jumped down. He walked to the front of the caravan, where he met up with Brosse.

“Something strange about this.” Brosse held a hand over his eyes to squint through the harsh sunlight.

Looking in the same direction, Loren nodded. “I can tell. Who are they?”

The shadows were dressed like normal townsfolk, as far as he could see. They

were unarmed; they simply stood there. For a moment, he didn't think they looked too dangerous, but he just as soon corrected himself.

These folks stood in the middle of a highway, one with no towns or villages nearby. In other words, the figures were dressed normally for town living but not for being way out in the middle of the wild. Indeed, none of them looked at all prepared for traveling.

Loren grew warier and warier. "Hey—"

Just before he could speak his mind, the shadows finally registered the adventurers. A few turned to face them at ludicrous speeds. Their mouths opened so far one might think their jaws had unhinged. Their fingers curled like claws, and they began their sluggish approach.

"Brosse!"

"What in the goddamn name of—wait, you lot, get back!"

Brosse's warning proved unnecessary. The adventurers in front turned and fled, desperate to avoid this conflict. The shadows continued to lurch forward in cold pursuit.

"Hey now, what's going on here?" asked Loren. "Aren't they human? How'd they get here?"

Had they been dealing with monsters, the adventurers would have drawn their weapons and gone on the attack. However, while the group approaching them definitely behaved strangely, none of them looked any different from an average person.

In this moment of confusion, the priest Laure called to them with as much volume as she could muster. "Everyone, watch out! Those are undead!"

"You serious? Undead in broad daylight?!"

While some of the adventurers cried out in shock, Loren calmly studied the figures. He wasn't too knowledgeable about the undead, but this wasn't his first encounter. A battlefield was more or less a factory for corpses filled with regret. While undead weren't that common, they popped up from time to time—especially when slain bodies were left to fester.

To wit, he knew ghosts couldn't appear under sunlight, but the ones with physical bodies, like zombies, could on occasion be seen wandering the battlefield at any hour of the day.

"Which means they're zombies?" he asked.

A handful of adventurers raced up past Loren. The red-haired boy was in the lead, followed by a knight, a magician, and a priest. Claes and his party had rushed out, weapons in hand, to intercept the approaching undead.

"They're jumping the gun," Brosse sighed bitterly, but they were technically doing the right thing.

Loren had every confidence that four iron-rank adventurers could wipe out mere zombies without issue. Actually, this would be a good opportunity to determine whether Claes had the skill to back up his bravado. He watched the road ahead with deep interest.

"Don't run too far ahead, Claes!" Leila cautioned, to no avail.

Claes kept up his swift pace and drew his longsword just as swiftly. The glimmer of his blade outshone the sun itself. As these figures took what looked to be a fearful step back, Claes's lips curled into a smile. "Zombies are no match for me."

Like Loren, Claes had concluded these were zombies. Zombies ranked high among the undead in terms of threat level, as they possessed the ability to increase their numbers by biting living flesh. However, they were so feeble that even copper-rank adventurers had little trouble dispatching them. An iron-rank party could eradicate them without breaking a sweat, even if outnumbered.

Not that any of that mattered to Claes. He was an up-and-coming adventurer with many hopes riding on his shoulders. For his own reasons, he had to prove he had the skill set to warrant that investment.

Thus, he decided to take the initiative whenever other adventurers hesitated. His comrades knew his determination, and for precisely that reason, they followed without complaint.

“Get back to your graves!” Claes cried as he swung. His blade plunged into the neck of the zombie in the lead.

The slow-moving undead failed to put up a defense. For that, it earned itself a severed windpipe. But Claes scowled as his sword stuck midway through this flesh—trapped in the neck he wanted to cut.

Zombie bodies were no stronger in death than they had been in life. Rather, damage and decay made them even more fragile. However, the one Claes had just cut still looked human. Neither could he detect any sign of mortal rot. What’s more, the force of his strike would have decapitated a normal human, yet he had met strong resistance about halfway through.

“Take that!” Claes was still an iron-rank adventurer. He mustered his strength the moment he felt the blade fight back, forcing it the rest of the way through, and kicked down the newly headless husk.

“They’re solid!” cried Leila, just beside him. She had torn another figure’s shoulder open. Her blow had similarly stopped at the collarbone, and as it tried to grab her, she kicked it to the ground. Pulling her sword free, she stuck the blade into its neck and twisted to dislocate the spine. “They’re not just zombies!”

At Leila’s warning, Laure put her hands together. Her mouth moved in muted prayer until her eyes snapped open in shock. “They’re revenants!” she shouted.

Anxiety washed over the adventurers. The word revenant meant “one who returns,” and it was reserved for a specific class of undead. They came to be in practically the same way as zombies: through regret, a spell, or the designs of another powerful undead. Compared to zombies—who, while unhinged, possessed essentially the same abilities they had in life—a revenant was stronger dead than alive and could even retain a certain level of intellect.

To wit, they were generally stronger than zombies. One-on-one, a copper would have a tough time facing a revenant, while a savvy iron would flee if they came in great enough numbers.

“Think he needs help?” Brosse reached for his weapon—dual handaxes.

Loren glanced his way and then back toward the battlefield. “Doubt it.”

Claes fought so fiercely. He made mincemeat of his foes, never faltering, even knowing he was up against revenants. Each swing inflicted a clean cut.

Seeing the enemies begin to fall, Brosse relaxed his hand. "He's not just talk."

"Guess not." Loren nodded. Putting aside whether or not he liked the guy, Claes's technique deserved praise.

"How about you? Just gonna sit and watch?"

"Who knows?" said Loren.

Loren's understanding was that Claes took issue with him and Lapis because they'd joined the quest on the power of their connections. In short, he despised the thought of someone hitching a ride on a job they didn't have the skills to complete. In that case, Loren wanted to know if Claes himself had what it took.

That said, this was only half the reason he watched. The other half was to keep an eye out, making sure no other foes approached. Ten-odd undead suddenly appearing in the middle of a road was strange by any measure. Perhaps something nearby had produced them. And maybe whatever or whoever that was had positioned the revenants as bait. Loren couldn't dismiss the chance of a surprise attack.

Undead generally lacked intelligence, but entities advanced enough to create them could be just as cunning as humans, if not more so. Take vampires, for instance. Loren knew those existed, at the very least.

"Maybe I'm overthinking it," he muttered.

"Hah?"

"Just talking to myself. Looks like they're finishing up."

Just as Loren said, the number of revenants was steadily declining. Claes's abilities went without saying, but Leila's sword skills also proved considerable; she impaled and immobilized a new revenant with each thrust. As follow-up, Laure the priest smacked Leila's stuck revenants with her mace, putting an abrupt end to their afterlives.

Only the magician Ange had no part to play, not that she could help it. Her comrades were too skilled to need magical support, and magicians could cast

magic only a limited number of times a day. Even so, it took a certain talent to calmly observe the situation and refrain from expending unneeded power.

“It’s over!” Claes took a sharp step toward the last one.

Then—light burst from both his feet and his longsword.

“What?!” Brosse shouted in shock.

Loren’s eyes widened ever so slightly.

Claes closed in and slashed the last revenant more fleetly and sharply than before. His blade entered from the undead’s shoulder and exited from their flank, meeting barely any resistance.

His party members all yelled as he did so.

“Claes?! You idiot!”

“Claes.”

“Looks like he got too fired up.”

Claes turned to the other adventurers, his attitude practically screaming, *How do you like that?*

However, he was abruptly surrounded by his party members, who scolded him one after the next.

“Don’t show that off left and right, how many times have I told you?!” Leila snapped.

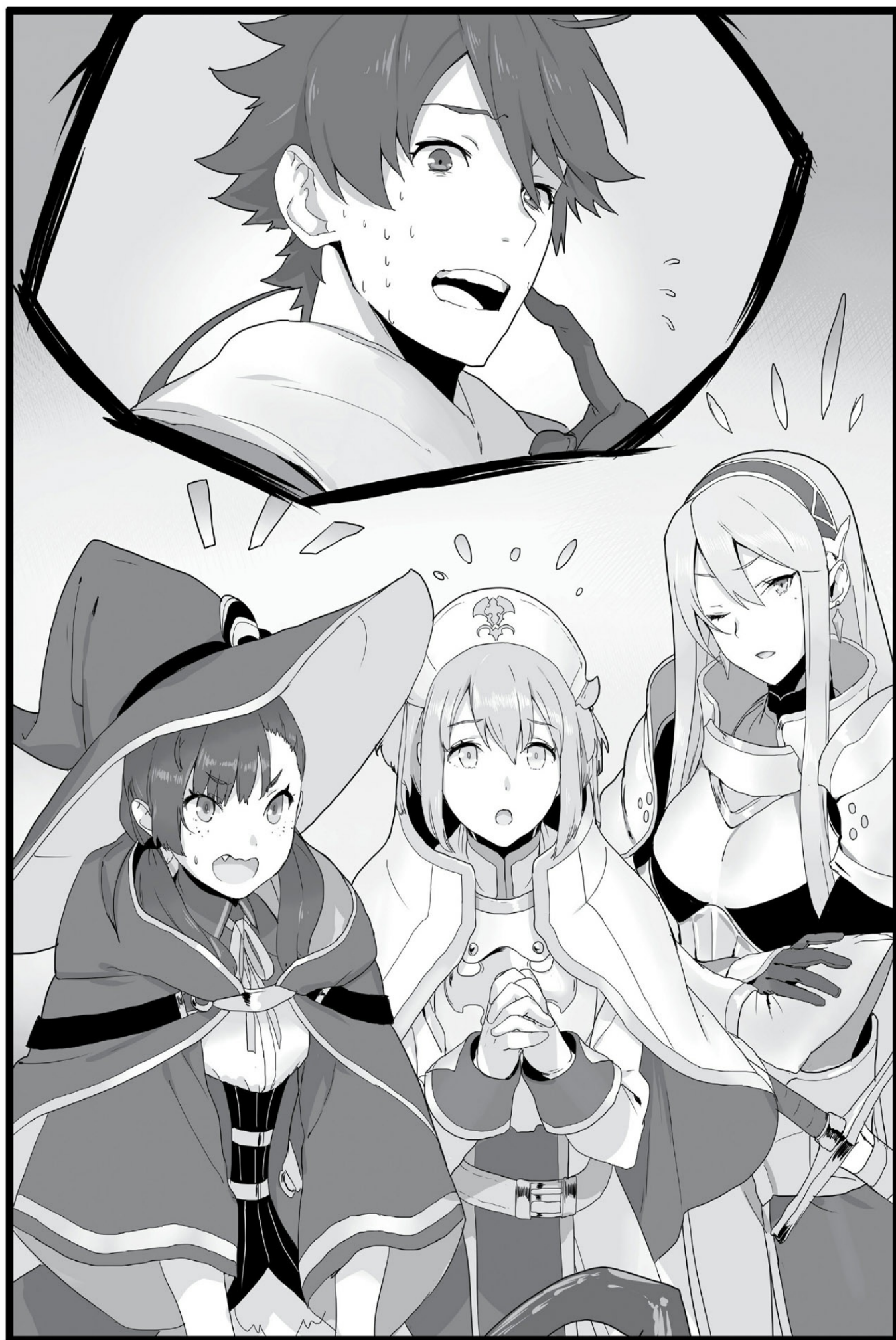
“B-but it’s not really a problem if anyone sees, is it?” said Claes.

“Claes, you can never tell who’s watching. Please contain yourself,” Laure urged.

“You could have won normally,” Ange said. “You really are stupid.”

“Ange, I’m, uh...”

The magician’s cold words hurt Claes the most, though he did his best to make excuses as he deflated.



Meanwhile, Brosse was unable to believe what he had seen. He stood there in a daze. “What was that? He suddenly went—poof.”

“You couldn’t follow?” asked Loren. “Man, I don’t want to get old.”

“Piss off! You’re saying you saw?”

“For what it’s worth.”

If Loren had seen those movements for the first time while fighting Claes, he didn’t know if he would have been able to deal with them. That fearsome acceleration, the unbelievable edge of the sword in his hand... A revenant’s body was sturdy, resistant to damage—yet Claes had severed the last one cleanly, bones and all.

Technically speaking, Loren thought he might be able to meet the boy’s blade if he really had to—but he would need the right sword. A normal longsword would be ruined, either by the end of the fight or because it snapped midway through.

“Still, what even was that?” Brosse muttered.

“Yes, about that,” Lapis said, nosing in on their conversation.

Brosse flinched—she had appeared before he sensed her presence. Loren was less flustered, though he gave her a side eye.

“You know what he did?”

“Of course I do. I don’t serve the god of knowledge for nothing.” As Lapis proudly raised her chin, Loren nodded, urging her on. She let out a somewhat deflated snort. “That was probably *Boost*.”

“Magic?” Loren assumed.

Lapis shook her head. “It isn’t. For argument’s sake, there is a similar spell called *Assist*. However, while *Assist* provides a marginal increase to the abilities of the person it is cast on, *Boost* enhances not only the person but his equipment as well.”

“Sounds convenient.”

If Lapis was to be believed, *Boost* enhanced the effects of sword, armor, and

every single tool a person held while so amplified. Loren and Brosse both realized just how powerful that could be.

“You don’t see it often,” said Lapis. “Normally, only those with the aptitude to become heroes or paragons can use that.”

Loren didn’t know the difference between heroes and paragons; they were both undoubtedly too high up in the clouds to matter to him. However, he let out a sigh. He had just realized how much of a pain this was going to be, being loathed by someone who was apparently close to being one or the other.

“That’s, well... I can’t blame the guy for being a stuck-up prick, I guess,” he said. “Not when he’s got that.” Although Loren had to wonder what someone with those gifts was doing as an adventurer. Granted, that muddled matter had nothing to do with him. He decided not to think about it.

“It seems he’s sponsored by the adventurers’ guild at the moment, but I take it he’s being propped up by some country as well,” said Lapis.

“Doesn’t matter. Not to us. Someone like him’s not gonna remember us once this quest is over.” Despite what he said, Loren took a step forward.

Lapis chased him rather frantically; she had noticed he was walking toward Claes. “What are you going to do?”

“Nothing. But for now...” Loren nodded ahead, not at the ruckus Claes’s party was still making but at the bodies strewn around them. “We should bury them. Can’t just leave them out to rot.”

“A sound point.” Lapis nodded.

Chapter 3:

A New Path to a Search

THE REVENANTS WERE BURIED, and the adventurers moved on. Some of them suggested returning to Kaffa after the encounter. However, the quest had been ranked and issued by the guild with full knowledge that something truly dangerous lurked on the road, and those who had agreed to take the quest hadn't yet encountered anything dire enough to warrant their return.

Before the corpses were buried, Loren looked through their belongings. None had anything notable save for their clothes. He found at most a coin purse or an accessory but nothing pointing to where they had come from.

Yet they had surely been normal denizens of some normal town before becoming revenants.

What few articles they gathered were stuffed into the wagon. If these folks had surviving families, it would be only right to return them. Even if that wasn't the case, the items served as evidence of their fight with the undead. That said, carrying a dead man's belongings wasn't a pleasant feeling. Ultimately, the battle lowered the convoy's morale.

At the same time, Claes's party received recognition for the skills they had shown in exterminating the revenants. Their reputation was on the rise. Whenever Claes shot Loren a smug look, Loren just ignored him. The man was skilled, that much was certain. As to whether that had anything to do with Loren, the answer was a resounding "no."

Not long after, their morale was lowered again. The driver of Scena's wagon passed on.

There was no preceding attack. Loren merely felt something was strange about the wagon's movement. So he tapped the man on the shoulder, only for him to tumble out of his chair, cold as a stone. Loren rushed to grab the reins and bring the horse to a stop. By then, the driver was already dead.

The cause was unknown. Lapis swiftly examined the driver, but his only

external wounds were the scrapes from the fall, and she couldn't find anything that could have killed him. If that wasn't bad enough, he, like the adventurers before him, was in the process of turning undead. Loren was forced to burn his body then and there.

"What the hell is going on?" Loren muttered.

Beside him, Lapis kept hold of the reins. The knowledge imparted by her god apparently encompassed wagon-handling as well. If he really was such a convenient god, Loren wondered why his faith wasn't more popular.

"Yes, what *is* going on?" she muttered.

On Lapis's opposite side was Scena, leaning against her, the wagon's rocking having lulled her into a peaceful sleep. While her expression was serene, Loren wondered what she thought of the situation. His own face clouded.

Scena had still hardly eaten a bite. She looked healthy, so she probably had stamina to spare. However, her refusal to accept food worried him deeply. She had to be under some great mental strain.

"There are a few of them over there," Lapis whispered.

Her words were sudden, without context. At first, Loren couldn't understand what she meant. A second later, he caught on and followed her gaze.

A gently sloping plain stretched out ahead of them, and he couldn't immediately spot whatever Lapis was looking at. *I'm overthinking again.* He patted his chest. But Lapis wasn't done.

"Human eyes can't see them," she said.

Loren recalled then that her eyes were arcane prosthetics, though it was impossible to tell from merely looking at them. Her limbs were also prosthetics, all of them replaced to better hide Lapis's true nature.

On his first quest, Loren had learned his priestly companion was a demon. She wandered the world both to gain experience and to find her lost arms, legs, and eyes. Putting all that aside, the fact that her eyes were fakes made it plausible that they functioned in ways normal eyes did not.

"Over there too," she said. "Just about twenty altogether."

“What’s wrong?” He gave up on seeing whatever she did, instead lowering his volume to a tense murmur.

Lapis tilted her head, slightly correcting the wagon’s course, and then lowered her voice as well. Neither of them wanted to wake Scena. “A swarm of undead means they’re coming from somewhere—being produced,” she whispered.

“It’s almost nightfall. It’s just gonna get worse.”

Undead were more active after dark. If they were seeing some even during the daytime, he didn’t want to imagine how many would pop up after sundown.

“If it comes to it,” said Lapis, “we’ll run. You, Miss Scena, and me. It’s all right, we’ll be able to make it to Hansa.”

“Am I the only one who gets the feeling we’re just gonna run into more undead the closer we get to that place?”

Lapis laughed flatly. “You’re a glass half-empty sort of guy, I see.”

“It’s nothing to laugh about, good grief.” Loren sighed.

His worries became all too real in a matter of hours.

As the group prepared for the second night of camp, they were yet again set upon by undead.

“Dammit! They’re everywhere!” shouted Brosse as he swung his axes, sending flesh and blood splattering all over. Zombies swarmed around him, their bodies half-rotten, their muscles and viscera peeking through the tears in their tattered skin.

Zombies were easy pickings alone, and handling a swarm of them was still within the realm of possibility. However, when they came one after another in seemingly endless supply, even an iron-rank adventurer began to feel the heat.

Flesh and blood adventurers grew fatigued over time. They would inevitably be rendered exhausted, immobile. But the undead knew no rest. No matter how they were sliced and diced, so long as their bodies still functioned, they never stopped attacking, ceaselessly grasping for the warmth of the living.

Another problem: The more formidable revenants were mixed in with the zombies. Alongside being sturdier and stronger, their movements were

comparatively smoother, and as expected, they also never tired. They moved on adventurers who were surrounded and already slowed.

“Eek! S-stay away!”

“Ow, ow, ow, ow! Don’t bite me! Don’t eat me!”

The female adventurers who had been in Scena’s wagon the first day—who had lost consciousness and, while recovering, still felt some fatigue, ran out of strength relatively quickly. Once the zombies locked them down, they were bitten one by one wherever their armor and clothes didn’t protect.

The teeth of a revenant sunk into the windpipe of an adventurer who rushed to save his companion, as if it had been waiting for him to come. He was left writhing on the ground.

“M-Mister,” Scena murmured.

Naturally, Loren was on the attack as well. Lapis stood nearby while Scena clung to his waist. Loren reached for the weapon on his back, and once he had a firm hold on it, he let himself sigh. “The first thing I cut with this beaut just had to be rotting flesh.”

“Do you have the time to complain?” Lapis asked.

“Doesn’t look like it.”

He freed the blade from its cloth and drew it in one motion. His draw followed straight into a horizontal swipe, the overwhelming weight of his blade barreling through the deathly darkness of night. It severed zombie and revenant alike, smashing and scattering flesh into fragments that stained the campsite.

Loren’s attack didn’t stop. After the first brandish, he swung the blade in the opposite direction to return it to his shoulder, reducing even more zombies to lumps of meat.

“Holy—you can swing that?!” cried Brosse.

What Loren held when he returned to his base stance was a weapon so pitch-black that its blade stood out even against the night. Insignias inlaid with gold scrolled down the surface, but most surprising was its sheer size.

His new weapon was longer and thicker than the massive sword he had used

before. While the blade was wider, the hilt was just a little shorter. But after swinging it around, he had determined he could use it without issue. The handle was wrapped in thin strips of a leathery fabric for grip, dyed as black as the blade.

“You just have to get used to it,” said Loren. “More importantly, what are we gonna do about this?”

Sword swung up against his shoulder, Loren patted Scena on the head to reassure her. His two swings had cleared their surroundings a bit, allowing Brosse to escape the zombies who’d cornered him.

The number of undead showed no sign of decreasing no matter how many they defeated. As a matter of fact, their numbers seemed to grow with time. Putting aside the question of where they were coming from, their party needed to decide what to do next, or they would be crushed by sheer force of numbers.

“What’s calling them here?” Loren asked as he once more swung his sword.

Lapis darted away from the grabbing hands of a zombie as she answered. “I presume it’s that we are the only living things in the area. Living souls are like beacons to the undead, and they flock like moths to a flame.”

“Don’t want to put this on you all of a sudden, Brosse—but, move forward or go back? What’s your call?”

At present, the adventurers on the escort quest were on the verge of annihilation, and their chances of success looked bleak. That left forcing their way through to Hansa or abandoning the quest and returning to Kaffa.

“It ain’t like I’m the leader around here,” Brosse bit back.

“Just wanna hear it. I won’t take issue either way.”

Brosse was supposed to have his own party members, but he had been fighting alone. Loren didn’t know whether they had been separated or if the rest had already become zombie feed. Regardless, it seemed to him that Brosse’s expert opinion was the most reliable guideline.

“In that case, we should go for Hansa,” Brosse said. “It’s got nothing to do with the quest. There might be less undead on the road back, but Hansa’s

closer. I doubt the whole city's fallen. It's our best bet."

"Any objections, Lapis?"

"Not that I can think of."

"Are you okay with that, Scena?"

The girl hugging his waist nodded.

"That settles it. Any wagons still usable?"

Strangely, zombies and revenants did not attack horses or any other animals. They only pursued the life-forms closest in nature to what they had been while they lived. However, while the horses were unharmed, they were spooked. They had toppled and trampled the wagons, and of the three, two were already wrecked. The remaining one was Scena's. Loren had luckily detached its horse from the wagon and staked its reins to the ground.

"I'll take care of the undead. Brosse, you hook the horse up to the wagon. Lapis, get Scena in there and get ready to go."

"Understood."

"Fine, got it! Ah, goddammit, they're all gone, the lot of them!" Brosse wailed as he got to work.

Lapis pulled Scena away by the hand and clambered into the wagon, shoving their client under the canopy. Loren would have to buy them time. He took a swing, crushing any undead who got too close with brute force.

"Survivors gather here!" he bellowed. "We're making a break for Hansa!"

Even if he wasn't going out of his way to save people, he wouldn't abandon them either. He continued to call out as he mowed through the hordes.

However, no one answered.

Already dead, huh? Loren's mood darkened, but then he saw the glint of a blade tearing through a corner of the undead encroaching on the wagon.

"It just had to be the small fry that survived," Claes snapped.

"Glad to see you too."

Claes's comrades were with him. Each was covered in grime and blood, but the fact that everyone was unbitten and moving spoke to their abilities. Although, they weren't exactly the survivors Loren had most hoped for.

"Going to Hansa?" Claes asked. "You got a plan?"

"Nope, just don't see a way around it. Don't like that, then try someone else."

Claes grimaced. There *was* no one else—they were the only survivors, and everyone knew it was too late to quibble about it.

"Claes, now's no time for debate," Leila said.

"She's right, Claes," Laure agreed. "We have to work together to break through."

Claes grudgingly conceded. Loren had no intention of driving any survivors away; he nodded toward the wagon, urging them to climb aboard.

The party shot him sullen looks but followed the order.

Maybe we should've just abandoned them. Loren sighed.

Suddenly, something caught his eye—something behind the magician girl at the back of the party. "Get down!"

"Huh?" Ange hadn't noticed it, her face blank. In the next moment, she was scooped up by something that burst up from the earth and lifted her body high into the air.

"Oh, that's..." Lapis watched this with no sense of urgency as she assessed the newcomer. "A dragon zombie...no, a bone dragon."

A dragon composed entirely of pure-white bone held Ange in its exposed maw—its head had sprouted from the soil. The ground shook violently beneath them and they dodged back, away from where the rest of the dragon's massive body wormed out of the earth.

"It's huge!"

"It is a dragon, after all," Lapis said.

Given that it was all bone, it was presumably undead, yet it still boasted a majesty befitting its draconic nature. Brosse went pale, throwing himself under

the wagon canopy. Claes's party stood still, like they had momentarily forgotten the plight of their magician, able only to stare.

"Leila!" Ange called from above. "Forget about me! Take Claes and get out of there!"

"I can't, Ange! I can't—I'll get you out!" Claes shouted back while Leila and Laure desperately clung to him to keep him from rushing forward.

"Let go of me! I have to save Ange!"

"That's crazy talk! How are we supposed to contend with that monster?!"

"Claes! Value your own life!"

"You're telling me to forsake her?! You think I can do that?!"

"What shall we do, Mr. Loren?" Lapis asked. Her tone urged him to forget about everyone else and run.

Loren sent her a troubled smile. Since the moment they had met at the weapons store, Claes had been nothing but condescending to him—and with that in mind, abandoning him was quite an enticing option. And yet.

"You know, I know what it's like to lose." He scratched his head. "So it's hard to just let it happen."

"I don't hate that about you." Lapis chuckled.

Loren nonetheless regretted dragging her into this mess. "We're not going to beat it, mind you. I'm just a mercenary, after all."

"On the count of three, I'll fire something to distract it. Use the opportunity."

"I thought the only blessing you knew was *Healing*."

"I just picked up a new one, fresh out of the oven." She patted her chest.

He nodded, then launched himself toward the massive bone dragon, unhesitating. On the count of one, he raced past Claes's still arguing party. On the count of two, the dragon turned its hollow eye sockets on him. It clenched its jaw, and Ange let out a yelp.

Beasts like this didn't need to eat to survive. However, they had a taste for the resentment, pain, and sorrow of living things. That was why it continued to

hold the girl in its mouth without killing her, slowly letting its fangs sink in to absorb every last lick of despair.

But any human was frail in the clutch of a dragon. Blood spat from Ange's mouth. By the count of three, Loren feared his efforts would be in vain.

In perfect synch with Loren's count, Lapis unleashed her new blessing. "Shine in the name of the lord, *Hold Light!*"

A radiant light manifested directly under the dragon's snout. It was so intense that it wiped away not only the darkness of night but the scent of undeath as well. It pierced the bone dragon's nonexistent eyes and scorched the surface of its bones, all seemingly without touching Ange.

Loren had been warned, and he shielded his eyes. Thus he arrived at the dragon's feet without losing his sight and smacked those bones with a sword driven by centrifugal force.

Steel rasped against bone, and the point where his blade hit smashed to smithereens. The dragon's body crumbled, having lost one of its support pillars. Loren raced up the toppled body, jumped from its back, and slashed at the back of its head.

"She's too good for you! Spit her out!"

While the dragon's head didn't shatter like its severed leg, the impact forced its mouth open and freed Ange's body. Loren—already in freefall after his attack—caught Ange, landed, and took off without looking back as the dragon recovered itself.

"Move!" he bellowed.

"Got it! Everyone who's not aboard gets left behind!"

The sound of Lapis's whip on the horse's back snapped Claes's party from their stupor and they scrambled to get on. They were soon joined as Loren rolled in with Ange, not a moment before the horse hurtled forward with the wagon.

The dragon let out an enraged roar, raising an earthquake as it lumbered after. They watched it kick against the earth with a newly regenerated limb.

“Thankfully the bastard’s all bone, so it can’t fly.” Loren muttered, lowering Ange.

A normal dragon’s wings were like a bat’s—covered in a membrane that let them catch the wind. While the bone dragon had the skeletal structure for wings, they were bare. Their horse wouldn’t have been able to outrun the thing if it could have chased them through the air.

“Dragons fly via magic,” Lapis corrected from her seat up front. “Wings have nothing to do with it.”

“You mean that thing *can* take off?”

“Most undead have low intellect, so they’re incapable of deploying spellwork. Which is to say, that one *shouldn’t* be able to. Probably.”

“Then...” *Maybe we can get away*, Loren hoped faintly.

Lapis smacked him down with cold, hard reality. “But it’s still far faster than a horse. It will catch up soon.”

The moment it caught up, their only option would be to fight. Loren doubted they had the capability to oppose it in earnest.

A violent bump in the road sent Ange into a coughing fit. She spat up another trickle of blood.

“Ange isn’t doing too well. Can’t you drive better?!” Claes snapped, his face pale.

Brosse grabbed him by the lapels. “You goddamn fool! Just try slowing down and see what happens next!”

“But Ange—”

While she wouldn’t die in the next few seconds, her wounds undoubtedly ran deep. Spitting up blood meant internal bleeding, and this violent shaking couldn’t be good for anyone in her state. But Brosse was right. The dragon was already gaining on them, and slowing down would only spell their demise.

“You’re saying to just let her die?!”

“If those bones catch us, we’re *all* going to die!”

Damn. If Brosse also figured they couldn't win, they really were in a bad way. Loren let out a deep sigh.

A dragon could not be trifled with. Loren had managed to rescue Ange from its maw only because he had launched a surprise attack while it still underestimated them. He was well aware they had now lost that advantage.

"Priest—Laure, was it?" Loren addressed the blue-haired girl desperately clinging to the wagon bench. "You can use blessings, can't you? Doesn't matter if you use them up, just treat her."

"Oi, you sure about that?" said Brosse. "If we do end up fighting, then we're fighting without a priest's blessings—that's near a lost cause already."

"We're done the moment we fight anyway," Loren countered. "If there's no use healing then, might as well heal here."

"You..." Claes stared at Loren, dumbfounded.

Even if loss was guaranteed, it was a fundamental tenet of fighting to preserve the limited number of blessings at hand. As the leader of his party, Claes knew this, and he had the right to make the final call. But this tenet was so deeply instilled that even in this situation, he hadn't thought to use a blessing, even if it might prove a lifeline for Ange.

"I'm not spending my priest on it. If she's beyond healing, give up on her."

With that, Loren cautiously moved through the shaking chassis, peeking his head through the canopy to see Lapis. The moon was out, but the world of night had no other light source. Visibility wasn't great. What's more, the road was ill-maintained. Yet Lapis kept the wagon moving at top speed as they dashed through the dark.

Contrary to Loren's fear, Lapis's face showed no unease. She stared ahead, focused and earnest.

"Can you actually see?" he asked.

Lapis glanced at him. "Of course I can. I can see clear as day."

"I don't know how I'll explain to the others. They haven't noticed yet, but they will."

“Tell them I have exceptional eyesight. Otherwise, say I’m driving on pure intuition.”

“Let’s hope they accept that.”

“More importantly, could you get the red-haired child out here?”

This demand came quite suddenly, and Loren failed to see her intention.

“Red-haired... You mean Claes?”

“I’ve just been calling him ‘idiot’ in my head, so sure, but the red-haired one, yes.”

If Lapis had singled him out, it was probably important. Loren ducked back into the wagon and grabbed Claes by the collar. He had been watching over Laure as she healed Ange.

“Wh-what are you doing?!” Claes demanded.

“What’s going on?!” Leila called after.

Loren dragged Claes—kicking and squirming—back to Lapis, who took one hand off the reins and held it out toward him.

“Pass him over.”

“You got it.”

Loren held Claes up. Lapis took over the grip on his collar before abruptly lobbing Claes toward the horse frantically pulling the wagon.

“Whoa?!” Claes screamed as he flew through the air. He clung to the horse’s neck as he landed on its back, doing his best not to fall off. If he fell, he would be trampled by the beast or run over by the wagon. If he luckily managed to avoid both, the bone dragon awaited him. “Th-the hell was that for?!”

“Please use *Boost* on that horse!” Lapis shouted as she cracked her whip. The whip was usually aimed at a horse’s rear, and it struck Claes’s instead. “It’s going to catch up no matter what we do! If you don’t want that, we need to use *Boost* to raise our speed. Now hurry!”

“I’ve never used it on a living—”

“The whining can wait, just use it!”

Another whip crack and Claes cried out. His hands burst with light. Then the light disappeared from his hands and permeated the horse's body. Loren definitely felt it get faster, and he grabbed onto the edge of the wagon as the shaking worsened as well.

"See? You can do it if you try! Now stronger! No time to sleep! We need to keep it running until morning!"

"Will something happen in the morning?" Loren asked.

"The bone dragon is weak to sunlight. It should stop chasing us before the sun rises. Come now! I see your light weakening!"

The next lash sent Claes's pained groan echoing through the still night.

"Well, uh... I guess he won't die."

It was a tragic scene, but Loren knew he shouldn't stop his companion. He led Scena away before her curiosity compelled her to peek. Loren shut the horse, Claes, and the bone dragon out of sight, sat down on the rocking wagon floor, and gently closed his eyes.



Loren opened his eyes. The wagon still shook but not as violently as it had when he fell asleep. Light streamed through the gaps in the canopy, and Scena's innocent sleeping face was pressed against his shoulder.

A quick scan told him the wagon itself hadn't been damaged. Ange was asleep—no surprise, after all she'd been through—and for some reason Brosse was as well. Moreover, Laure and Leila's eyes were somewhat reproachful.

"Rise and shine," Laure said darkly.

The way Loren saw it, there had been nothing to do *but* sleep. He hadn't seen the sense in staying on edge all night, and he couldn't see now why anyone would criticize him for it. If the dragon caught up, he would either have had to fight and die or die in his sleep, and if he was going to die anyway, he would rather die at rest.

"We got away, by the looks of it," he said. "What happened to Brosse?"

Ange looked a little better off, seeing as how she wasn't coughing up blood anymore. But Brosse was pale. His breath was shallow, and he looked like he might drop dead at any second.

Loren looked to Leila. Had there been an attack from something besides the dragon?

The armored woman shook her head. "We don't know. He got like that a little after we started running. He keeps getting worse too."

"Did you try *Healing*?"

"Laure had to rest. We applied what first aid we could, but nothing took."

Loren shifted Scena onto the floor, taking care not to wake her. He slowly approached Brosse and peered into his face. Indeed, the old adventurer's complexion was visibly pale. His brow was covered in a sheen of sweat, and his mind seemed hazy. His half-open eyes failed to find purchase on anything.

"I don't know if it's an illness, but this is bad." Loren had no medical knowledge, but he could tell Brosse was in a terrible state. This would likely prove fatal before long.

"Ange is in a bad way too. We used *Healing* twice, but her wounds are

numerous and deep. She's barely alive."

Not that they could do much about it. The rest was in heaven's hands. So, Loren turned his back to them and popped his head out the front.

"Ah, you're awake, Mr. Loren. It's a decently nice morning." Lapis had kept her hands on the reins through the night, yet she greeted him with a smile, not a hint of weariness on her face.

Loren looked up at the sky. It was clear and blue, like the terrible night before had never happened. The sun was still low, but it bathed them in ample light.

Either the horse was particularly robust, or Claes's power had worked wonders. The beast had stuck it out through the night ride and still pulled them forward, slow but steady. On its back, Claes looked weary as hell. He had a spattering of lash marks too, but he still held tight.

Lapis's abuse had all been in the name of getting away from that dragon, but seeing the evidence of it, Loren broke into a light sweat. He prayed the experience didn't awaken anything too uncomfortable for the boy. But there were more pressing concerns than Claes's future.

"How long to Hansa?" he asked.

Lapis thought for a moment. "I don't know. I don't even know if we're going in the right direction."

While startled by this confession, Loren couldn't say he'd expected much better. A normal person wouldn't have been able to drive under those conditions at such speed all through the night. One wrong turn was understandable.

"It's been a straight path, for what it's worth," said Lapis.

"Then we're probably fine."

"We're not so fine back there, it seems." Lapis glanced over her shoulder.

Loren shrugged. "Nor up there either."

"Oh, he's fine. Halfway through he was moaning 'oh yes,' and 'more.'"

Loren stared at her, aghast.

Lapis smirked mischievously. "I lied. But don't you think a whipping from a beautiful girl is its own reward?"

That wasn't a question he wanted to answer. He knew it took all sorts to make a world, and it wasn't as if he hadn't met such people before. That didn't mean he got it.

"Not my scene."

"That's nice. I don't know what I'd do if it were."

He couldn't tell how serious she was being. A troubled look crossed his face, only to be replaced by a different form of bewilderment. Lapis was offering him the horse's reins.

"You should be able to drive us down a straight path, right, Mr. Loren?"

"I guess so."

"Then could I leave you to it for a bit? I'm almost at my limit here."

Loren knew firsthand that there was nothing good about sleep deprivation. Changing drivers was hardly of any consequence, and he accepted. "You should probably go in if you want to sleep."

The driver's perch was no place for rest. While the wagon had one injured and one ailing, there was enough space to lie down.

Lapis shook her head. "Oh no, just lend me your shoulder. I'd much rather stay here."

Her head fell on his shoulder before he could reply. In hardly any time at all, she was breathing the rhythmic pattern of sleep. Loren was startled by the ease with which she fell asleep, but he took it as the sudden onslaught of fatigue. He took care not to move her body and focused on keeping the wagon on its path.

"It would be helpful if I knew where we were..."

They were, most likely, on the way to Hansa. However, pressing on without knowing for sure made him anxious. *If I just had a sign*, he thought, when he felt a tug on his back.

He turned to see Scena's hand reaching out of the canopy and pulling on his

sword's cloth wrapping. He turned back toward her as far as he could, taking care not to alter their course. "What's wrong?"

"Mister...the ladies, they're all..." Her voice was uneasy.

Loren peeked over Scena's shoulder and saw that both Laure and Leila had collapsed beside Ange.

As they said, one bad thing often led to another.

Loren didn't stop the wagon. What would be the point? He didn't know the cause of their illness or what to do about it. "Something's going on... This a curse or something?"

"What do we do, Mister?"

"It's not 'Mister.' It's Loren. But what to do?" He frowned. "Well, we can't do anything. No treatment out here. We'll have to reach town."

"Hansa is just a little further."

"You sure?"

Scena's head bobbed up and down as she pointed at the trees and glades. "I've walked around this area for my father's work before. I remember the scenery. It shouldn't be long."

"That's the best news I've heard all week. You think my luck's finally taking a turn?"

Hansa was Scena's home, and her information was therefore credible. Once they arrived, at the very least they would have access to medicines and other treatments. It would likely be possible to get a doctor to evaluate them. There was a good chance the four in the wagon could then be saved.

In barely any time at all, the walls of a city appeared on the horizon. As a city-state, this was the nation of Hansa itself as well as its capital. Its defenses were hefty, its ramparts high and thick. Loren made out a gate they would presumably have to pass through if they wanted in.

Would he be allowed to enter with one injured and three of unknown condition? He worried for a moment, but worst-case scenario, he could ask the guards to call a doctor. Surely they wouldn't treat him too poorly once they

knew he was escorting the daughter of the chancellor.

Before he knew it, Lapis was awake. She lifted her head from his shoulder. "Be careful, Mr. Loren. Something's off."

"What's wrong?"

That warning wasn't nearly enough to go off of. Sure, a city gate would usually have lines of people coming and going, and he didn't see any sign of such folk. However, there would obviously be fewer people wandering around if undead were on the prowl. Then Loren realized it wasn't just travelers who were missing. He saw no gatekeepers or sentries on the wall either. It was hard to believe they had all simply abandoned their duty. *So that's what she means.*

Lapis slowly reclaimed the reins. "Be ready to fight at any moment," she said.

"Got it. But you don't mean...the whole town?"

"I don't know. I considered, perhaps, that they had closed themselves off from the undead threat, but the gates are wide open."

Definitely proof that something untoward had happened.

"What now?"

"We have no choice but to go in. Even if no one's there, perhaps they've left supplies behind. Or perhaps they've hunkered down for a siege farther in."

Whatever the case, their initial objective had been to take Scena to Hansa. This was their destination; they had to reach it. What's more, Ange's injuries put them in a race against time, while Brosse, Leila, and Laure might soon end up like the adventurers who had died on the first day.

"I knew it," Loren muttered. "I've got no luck."

Whatever turn he thought he'd taken had been an illusion. There was no going back. Given this trend of misfortunes, the moment they tried as much, they'd probably run into that bone dragon again.

"I'm sure it will work out," said Lapis. "Let's go."

Unlike Loren, Lapis evidently didn't feel too nervous just yet. She urged the horse toward the gate, and he had no means of stopping her. Instead, he

focused on the growing outline of the city.

For the first time in his life, Loren passed through a gate with no sign of travelers and merchants, nor the sentries who stopped such folk before letting them pass. It was uncanny as nothing in his life had ever been.

Beside him, Lapis gazed about at her leisure. She lightly whipped the horse, thereby striking Claes, still on its back. The boy convulsed, exacerbating the ghastly atmosphere.

“Shouldn’t we take him down already?”

Unsettling visuals aside, Loren worried Claes could technically be counted among the ranks of the injured. It was mainly Lapis who had injured him, but Loren decided not to think about that too hard.

This proposal earned a blatantly sour look from Lapis. “I don’t want to touch him.”

“Neither do I, if I can help it.”

Even if having Claes twitching on the horse was a bothersome predicament for the horse, that didn’t leave Loren feeling particularly motivated to stop the wagon and get him down. Mostly, he didn’t want to handle someone who looked that liable to seize up.

“Still, is there really no one around?” Loren asked.

The wagon proceeded slowly down what was presumably Hansa’s main avenue, yet they saw not a shadow and not a sound reached his ears. The phrase “ghost town” brought to mind a place ravaged by time, but Hansa had clearly been well maintained up until a matter of hours ago.

“And it doesn’t look like the undead attacked either,” said Lapis.

In that case, they would have seen traces of the assault in the streets and on buildings, but as far as Loren could see, there were no signs of combat. No broken windows, no bloodstains.

“Didn’t think such a pretty city could be this eerie.”

“I’d walk through this empty city with you—doesn’t that sound a little romantic?” Lapis said with a smile.

Loren narrowed his eyes and looked around warily. He had no idea where she got her nerves of steel, but there was no need for him to point them out and put her in a mood. Hansa was already bad enough as it was. “For starters, we should look for a hospital. You haven’t forgotten we’re carting around four people at death’s door, have you?”

“You do have a point. Miss Scena, do you know the way to the nearest clinic?”

Cities were best navigated by their citizens. Scena popped her head out and, after scanning the area, pointed in a direction. “I think there was one over there.”

“Then off we go.”

Lapis turned the horse’s head accordingly. After a while rolling down the empty streets, they arrived at a private clinic. There were apparently other hospitals run by the state, but this was the only place Scena knew.

“Father brought me here once, saying the man who ran it was a good doctor.”

“Am I the strange one for thinking there’s something weird about that?” Loren asked. Sure, it wouldn’t necessarily be strange for a town doctor to be more skilled than one employed by the local lord, but he didn’t know what to think about a head of state avoiding his own people.

“This may be for the better, you know?” Lapis said. Her eyes shifted between Loren and the girl clinging to his waist. Lapis stopped the wagon out front, detached the horse, and fastened it to a street post. “Since we don’t know what’s going on, I would rather avoid larger facilities,” she added.

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t mean anything, really. Can you start unloading people? Hey, you help out too.” The latter she addressed to Claes, who Loren had finally let off the horse’s back.

Claes had taken a few blows, but he was healthy compared to his comrades. He had regained consciousness soon after he was put on the ground, though at first he had been weakly sprawled out. “You could let me rest a bit. We got away from that dragon more or less thanks to me.”

“Aren’t you forgetting it was our Mr. Loren over here who saved your Ms. Ange from that very same dragon?”

“Ah...”

Did it take that long to remember? Loren sighed.

But Claes stood, turned toward Loren, set his eyes on a point down and to the right, and spoke in a tone that was hard to pick up. “U-umm...for saving Ange, you know. I want to...thank you.”

“She’s not saved yet. If you’ve got the time for babbling, help me get her in the clinic.”

“Got it.” While Claes hung his head, his reply was sincere enough.

Loren grinned. “Come to think of it, when you were being whipped by Ms. Priest over here all night... That do anything for you?”

“What?! Of course not!”

“Never crossed your mind? Never thought, ‘this ain’t too bad’?”

“Like hell! That ain’t my kink!”

“So you know what a kink is, huh, kid?”

Claes was red to his ears, but after he glared at Loren, something seemed to dawn on him. He reached some new conclusion, turned his back, and began unloading his fallen party members from the wagon.

“You didn’t really have to,” Lapis teasingly whispered. “Riling him up to get him back on track.”

“That’s not me. I just felt like teasing.”

Loren brushed Lapis aside with a dismissive wave of his hand and then walked to the wagon to get the rest. He got Brosse, leaving the other three for Claes. It wasn’t that he wanted to give Claes extra work, more that the other three were women, and they were Claes’s party members. Having Claes carry them would leave the least room for problems for later. Not that he knew what Claes thought on the matter.

To make up for it, Loren got to work unloading the camping supplies the

wagon had been stuffed with. He didn't have what had been unloaded at the campsite. The items left aboard had been kept on the wagon because they had been deemed unnecessary. This included some food and a handful of medical supplies. While he doubted they would be enough to be much help, at least they would be better than nothing. But Lapis immediately found something genuinely useful.

"It may be private, but it's still a clinic. They left behind plenty of medicines."

There were beds as well. Their cleanliness was somewhat questionable, but Loren lay Brosse down on one and Claes did the same with his party members. Soon, Lapis made her entrance with Scena, their arms full of medicinal vials. She had ransacked the office while they were transporting the injured.

"We should be able to treat most things with what we have," she declared.

"I see. Then please hurry. Don't know how I'd sleep at night if they died after we got them so far."

Loren hadn't the skills or the knowledge to help. Apparently, Claes was in a similar boat. His party's magician was the one with the know-how, but she would be on the receiving end of care this time around.

"Very well. I'll try my hand at a few things," said Lapis. "Would you two please take Miss Scena and leave?"

"You're kicking me out?! Those girls are my comrades!" Claes snapped. They expected this sort of thing from him at this point.

Lapis looked at him with contempt, the intensity of her gaze shutting his mouth. "My treatment will involve loosening and stripping them of their garments... You're telling me you want to see that?"

"Ah, no, uh, I—"

"And I'll probably have to strip Mr. Brosse as well. My, to want to see a naked middle-aged man. You're pretty hardcore, I've got to say."

"Who said that?!"

As Claes's face turned red, Lapis silently gestured at the patients. *Why are you shouting in a hospital? Have some shame!* her eyes seemed to say. Once Claes

clapped a hand over his mouth, she pointed to the exit.

He followed her orders this time, dragging himself out. As Loren was about to follow him, Lapis spoke again.

“Mr. Loren, please leave this building’s security to Claes. Take Miss Scena and search the surrounding area.”

“Me? With Scena?” *How did she get that combination?*

“The thing is, I don’t see Claes getting much in the way of answers if I send him out. Nor do I want him looking after Miss Scena.”

“You can’t keep her with you?” Loren had no problem with searching. He just didn’t know why Scena had to come along. There was no telling what he’d run into, and he didn’t see the sense in exposing a young girl to danger.

“As I told you, I will be stripping their clothes for treatment. The women may be fine, but Mr. Brosse’s naked body might have a negative influence on her.”

“You’re stripping him bare?”

Loren didn’t think she had to go that far, but Lapis was the one who knew what she was doing, and how could he argue with that? He definitely didn’t feel like leaving Scena behind in that case. Still, he hesitated.

So Lapis gave him another push. “You just have to search around a bit. Miss Scena is a local. She should know the lay of the land.”

“I guess.” Loren didn’t really expect a well-to-do lass to know the town *that* well, but going off what she’d said so far, Scena was knowledgeable to a certain degree.

“Can’t you do that for me?” Lapis’s earnest expression was a complete reversal from how she’d looked when she dealt with Claes. She definitely had a real reason for asking this, and Loren wasn’t going to object any further. He gave a nod, light as it was.

“I’m coming straight back if it gets dangerous,” he warned.

“That goes without saying. Have a safe trip.”

Loren would do what she asked. She wasn’t telling him something—or he just

didn't get what she was trying to imply—and he didn't feel up to digging. Still, he told Claes to protect the hospital as he left and slowly began his own search.

Chapter 4:

A Search to a Pursuit

THE CLINIC THEY HAD taken refuge in seemed to be in the shopping district—it was surrounded by rows upon rows of all sorts of storefronts. Loren led Scena through them slowly, entering the deserted stores and examining the items they had on display.

“The herbs are no good. They’re all shriveled up, but they’re not rotten yet. I don’t see any signs of a struggle. That house with half-eaten food was the same. Not the cleanest, but no signs of an attack.”

“Where did everyone go?” Scena asked.

Loren didn’t have an answer. He wondered the same thing and hoped he would soon find someone who would conveniently explain it to him. Though he knew it wouldn’t be that easy.

“They didn’t get up and run,” he said. “The place feels too lived in. Didn’t pack any bags, and the valuables are all still there.”

No matter which house he entered, the money was left untouched. An active mercenary might have indulged here and there, but Loren let it be. He had fished through the pockets of enemy soldiers before, but this was no battlefield. These were the leavings of normal people. Even if that wasn’t strictly true anymore, with everyone gone for unknown reasons, he didn’t want to touch what they had left.

“Scena, what was the population of this city?”

“Popu-what?”

He waved his hand to say “never mind.” Scena had walked around a bit for her father’s work, and she knew the town layout, but she didn’t know any precise figures.

“Going off the size, I’d say thirty to forty thousand,” Loren estimated. “Gone, like smoke. I doubt anyone’d believe me if I reported it.”

Whether or not he succeeded in returning Scena to her father, it was his duty to bring a report to Kaffa that detailed what he had seen—with, ideally, some kind of explanation. He let out a hefty sigh, knowing that report was likely to be complete and utter nonsense.

He could look at the town now and know what he saw was real, but he also knew he would laugh if someone explained it to him sight unseen. “There’s no way everyone could just disappear without a trace. Where’s the blood? The bodies?”

“Mister.” Scena gripped his coat, voice anxious.

Loren felt a little ashamed of his own careless muttering. This girl had once been a resident of Hansa. Why was he hoping to find the corpses of her friends?

“Sorry. I’m getting worked up.”

“No, it’s fine. But really...where did my father—where did *everyone* go?”

If Scena’s parents were still alive and in town, they were probably in the city center. Loren had a few reasons for thinking so, mainly that those with power usually concentrated that power at the center of their holding, building some fine estate or castle there.

The path to this area was simple, straight down the main avenue. While Hansa had high surrounding walls, they had no measures against civil insurrection, and that road was one long uninterrupted path from the gate. While Hansa was a small city-state, Loren had to wonder if it was really safe to build cities this way—not that it was any of his business.

“I’d like to snoop through the chancellor’s house.”

If there were any survivors left, Loren expected that house was where he would be most likely find them. If possible, he wanted to meet these survivors, and if not, he wanted to leave town with all due haste. They’d had seven combatants at one point, but four of them couldn’t stand. It would be far too dangerous to attempt anything with only three.

“We could wait until those four recover before we make our move,” he said, “but I dunno if we have the time.” Whatever it was that had left Hansa in this state, Loren didn’t trust that it would overlook their presence for long.

Perhaps because he was busy weighing options, Scena noticed something strange before he did. “There’s someone over there, Mister.”

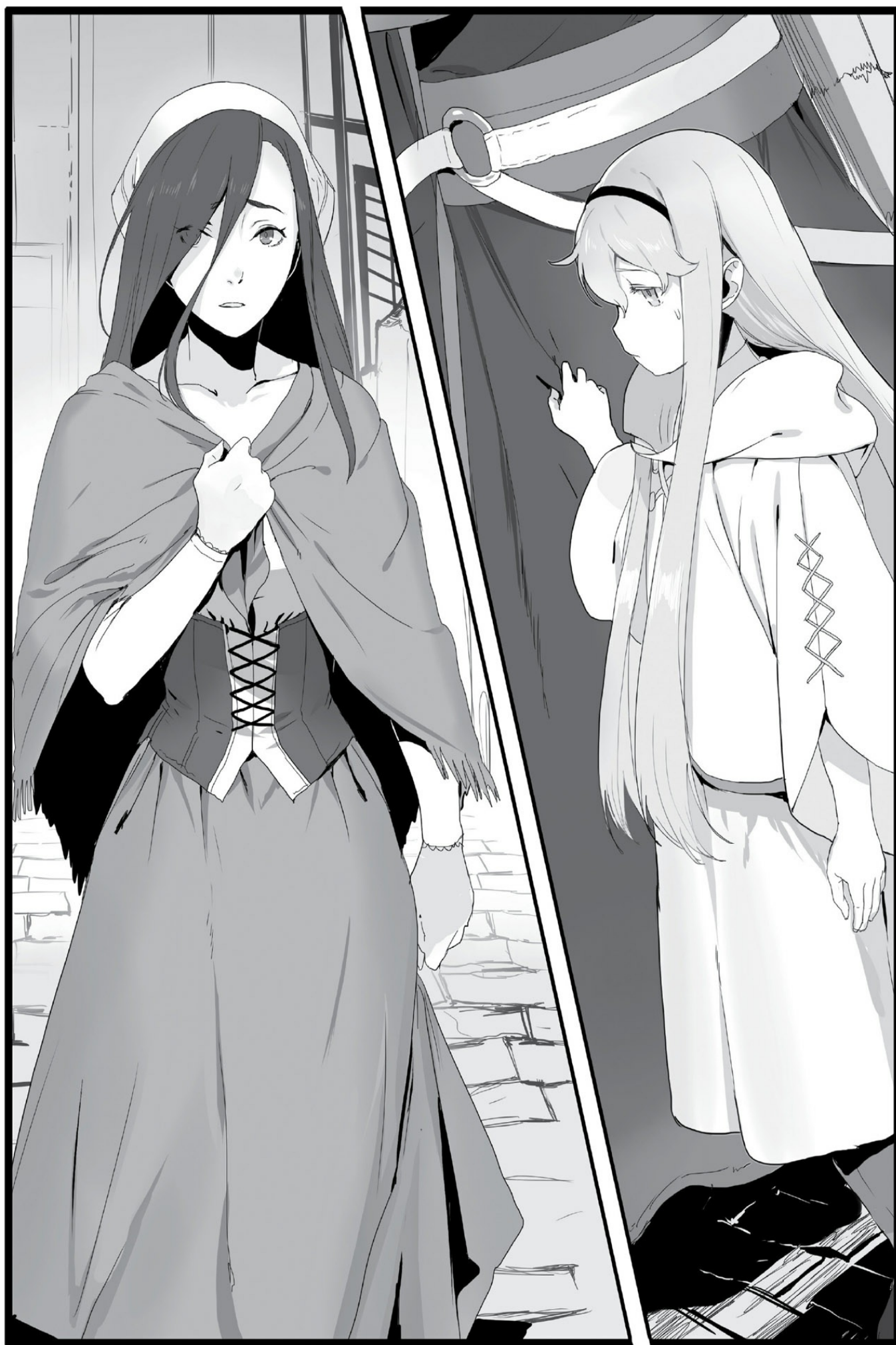
They had just searched their umpteenth house. They had failed to find any noteworthy items or information, and Loren was on his way to the next one when Scena gave his coat a rather strong tug. Whipping around, he recognized a woman in street clothes peeking at them from around a nearby corner.

“Wait! I’m not here to hurt you,” he called.

For a moment, he wondered if entering houses without permission had made him look suspicious, but while the woman flinched, she didn’t run. She continued to watch them.

“I’m an adventurer,” said Loren. “Came to town for a quest and found it like this. I’m looking into what happened, and...”

“You’re here...to help?” the woman timidly asked. She looked to be in her early twenties, an inoffensive and mousy brunette.



“Not exactly. Are you a resident?”

“Yes. My name is Stehr.”

“What happened here? Where did all the townsfolk go? Why are you here?”

Loren peppered Stehr with questions in rapid succession. Her eyes widened, but she shook her head.

“I don’t know. It happened a few days ago. All of a sudden, everyone started acting strange... I got scared. I hid in the basement, but I’ve run out of food, so I came out to see the aftermath.”

“You got a family?”

“I was alone. My parents passed a while back.”

“Know anyone who’s still here?”

“Sorry. I don’t.”

Loren had thought he might finally be on the verge of understanding something, but Stehr had far too little information to offer. Perhaps there was nothing to be done, but he couldn’t hide his disappointment.

“Um, pardon me, but isn’t that the chancellor’s daughter?” Stehr asked upon noticing Scena. “In that case, you really should go to his manor... There are many soldiers there, and it has walls, so I suspect they might be safe.”

“Guess you’re right.”

That left the problem of what to do with the four in their crew who couldn’t move. Once Lapis treated them to a degree, perhaps they could be carried by wagon. In that case, Loren was better off heading to the manor first and confirming the presence of any other survivors. He turned on his heels. He would consult Lapis before he did anything else.

“So, what are you gonna do?” he asked Stehr over his shoulder.

“Please take me with you! I fear I won’t be able to reach the manor alone.”

Loren didn’t know what in the deserted city Stehr thought would stop her. At least, he didn’t see anything immediately dangerous on the main road. But if something *was* lurking, waiting for a victim to pass by, Stehr might not be able

to run away. So, bring her along or let her wander off on her own? Both options were equally troublesome.

“Fine, come with us.”

Loren hadn’t found any explanations, but a survivor was something. He led Scena and Stehr back to the clinic, where Claes remained obediently on the lookout. The sight of a stranger made him reach for his weapon, but he relaxed once Loren explained how they’d met Stehr.

At least Claes was earnest enough to do the job assigned to him. His earlier arrogance and caustic tone had likely been more the product of his environment, thought Loren. He decided to give the boy a little more benefit of the doubt.

Once inside the clinic, they met Lapis before they reached the sickroom.

“I’ve finished the treatment, but please keep out for the time being,” she said, driving them back.

Loren sensed something strange about this, but there were more important things to discuss. He introduced her to Stehr and reported the possibility of survivors in the center of town, as well as the other results of his search—to wit, that there were none, because he had seen no other survivors nor sign of what might have become of everyone else.

“The sun’s still up, so I think this is our chance to make a move. How about it?” asked Loren.

“You’re right...but...” Lapis folded her arms in thought, a slightly pained look on her face. “The unknown ailment didn’t prove much of a problem. Ms. Leila, Ms. Laure, and Mr. Brosse should all recover in time. The problem is Ms. Ange. She’s suffering from blood loss and severe internal rupturing. She is still in critical condition, and I wouldn’t recommend moving her.”

“How long until we can?”

“At least the rest of today. When Laure is back on her feet, I presume she’ll have recovered her blessings, so we’ll be able to stabilize Ange for a move tomorrow.”

Loren nodded. “I wouldn’t want the move to be what kills her.”

But if they stayed at the clinic, they’d spend a night in a city with some unknown danger lurking who knew where. They just didn’t know what they needed to protect themselves from.

“We could leave Claes on guard and go check it out ourselves,” said Loren.

“You do think some of the most cold-blooded, merciless things, Mr. Loren.”

In other words, leaving Claes alone meant pitting him against the unknown while protecting four immobile victims. They might as well leave everyone to die. It wouldn’t be much better on their front either. Leaving with Scena and Stehr would mean they’d always be on their guard to protect the two noncombatants.

“What do you think?” Lapis asked.

“We camp here tonight,” Loren decided. “Then move when everyone’s able.”

If their fighting force was reduced to Loren, Lapis, and Claes, he’d rather they fought together than divided.

“Understood. Then we’ll have to prepare for the night.”

“Let me help y—” Stehr started, but Lapis held up a hand.

“No need. Ms. Stehr, I think I’ll have you and Miss Scena kept sequestered in separate rooms.”

“Please... I could at least keep Lady Scena company,” Stehr pleaded.

“If you wish to accompany us, you’ll do what we say,” said Lapis curtly. “If you cannot follow simple directions, we will be unable to take you along.”

“Um, what?”

Lapis’s sudden change in tone took Stehr by surprise. Loren prodded Lapis with a cautionary elbow.

Lapis blinked blankly at him—then cleared her throat and tried again. “Oh, sorry. Back home—I mean, I fell back on the mannerisms they drilled into us in training for the priesthood... Ahem. But you really must obey orders. Can I count on you?”

While confused, Stehr seemed to understand that Lapis wouldn't budge. She nodded, hesitant though she was.

The sun receded, bit by bit. Loren pumped the bellows to light the firepit in a smithing apparatus. The pit was shaped like an urn. Once filled with charcoal and lit, pulling the bellows ignited high-temperature flames that burst out of the opening. Loren could carry the whole thing himself.

It was enchanted with a spell that controlled the flames, allowing the user to adjust the intensity of the blaze. The bellows lever drew mana from whoever touched it to power the spell. Lapis declared it quite a valuable item, but Loren only cared that it fulfilled its purpose.

Whatever other uses it might have, Loren had brought the contraption back to the area outside the clinic because it worked well enough as a bonfire. The crucible he had picked up along with the setup clinked as he filled it with materials he had gathered from nearby. He used a pair of tongs to hold the vessel over the flames.

This work produced a great deal of heat and risked setting any nearby building alight. Loren couldn't possibly have used it in the clinic, so he had reluctantly set himself up with a chair outside.

"Whatever are you doing?" Lapis asked. Her eyes followed his every hand movement with deep interest.

However, Loren focused on his work without offering a reply. The smoldering coal wasn't yet hot enough to melt the crucible's contents. He gripped the bellows lever and pumped it up and down to blow air into the pit. The coals within blazed more furiously, the spell amplified them further, and finally he achieved the intensity he required.

"I feel rather miserable when you ignore me, Mr. Loren."

When she put it like that, he had no choice but to respond. "It should be obvious enough. I'm trying to play blacksmith."

"Yes, but what is the good blacksmith trying to make?"

Hansa was a desolate, lonely place during the day. Who knew what it would become at night? Considering the undead often lurked outdoors, they could reasonably expect whatever awaited them here would come for them from that direction. As such, Claes was out breaking down walls for lumber and constructing a barricade around the clinic.

No matter whether the buildings were made of wood or stone, Claes could destroy them with ease. Lapis had chosen him for the task largely because his gift made him good at it, but also because she figured that, in the event of legal trouble, she could blame all the property damage on him.

“It’s been nothing but undead since Kaffa,” said Loren. “We need a specialized weapon.”

“Your sword isn’t enough?”

Loren glanced at the massive blade by his chair. The thing was pitch-black from point to pommel, and he was pretty sure it wasn’t an ordinary sword—especially given who had recommended it. But at present, the only notable feature he could discern was its color. It didn’t seem to have any special functions.

“I like to take it easy sometimes,” he said.

He didn’t find his new blade difficult to swing, but he grew tired more quickly if he swung such a thing for too long. As such, he would forge something that would let him take the load off, as it were.

“I see. So, again, what exactly are you making?”

“Well, when it comes to undead, you basically want silver, right?”

Beside Loren was a mold for making long, thin slabs. He poured the melted mixture into it, forming a bar around the size of his palm, and then, once it solidified, hammered the back of the mold to release the newly formed bar. Lifting the orange bar with his tongs, he placed it on an anvil—also hauled over from the smithy—and started hammering the end to a point. Finally, he dunked the length into a barrel of water. A cloud of steam rose. Loren filled the crucible again.

“A silver weapon? Where are you getting the silver from?” asked Lapis as she

rolled up her sleeves. Then she plunged her hands into the water to retrieve Loren's creation—a crude blade that any real smith would sneer at. She rubbed her finger against its blackened surface until she could confirm the silver underneath.

"Well, y'know...tough times and all." Loren trailed off.

Lapis glanced over at the bag Loren was getting his material from. Within swelled a sizable number of silver coins.

The amount of silver in each coin varied from country to country. When there wasn't enough silver on hand for minting coinage, it was mixed with other metals to form an alloy. But all silver coins did contain at least some silver. There were a few jewelry pieces mixed in with the coins as well, but the majority of the bag's contents were those coins.

Lapis lifted her eyes and stared pointedly at Loren. "Isn't it a crime to destroy currency?"

"You tell me." Loren kept working.

A crime was only a crime so long as someone could enforce it. They had yet to see any such person in Hansa.

"How are Scena and Stehr doing?" he asked.

"I contained them in separate rooms." Contained was a strong word, but Loren assumed Lapis had just locked the doors. Then she casually added, "I used chairs and tables to barricade them in. They're not getting out whether they want to or not."

"You really *did* imprison them."

"How rude. If they can't leave, then no one can reach them. I locked the windows, too, so under normal circumstances, it would be perfect."

That last sentence bothered Loren. Keeping his eyes trained on his work, he lowered his voice. "So what did you notice?"

"That question is so vague, I don't know how to respond," Lapis flatly replied.

He snorted, at which she tilted her head. Then he spoke in a theatrical tone of great sorrow. "You can't tell me?"

“That’s not it at all. You truly do need to be more specific. I simply have no idea what you want me to tell you.”

“Start with our recent trail of troubles. You’ve realized something, haven’t you?” It wasn’t really a question.

“Do you mean the reason we found Miss Scena in the forest? Or why the forest wolves didn’t attack her? Or the cause of the mysterious illness robbing our party members of their minds and well-being? Or perhaps about our new little survivor we found now of all times?”

She evaded answering any of these questions as slickly as rain sliding down a church steeple. Loren glared. If she had all those things figured out, she had practically solved the entire matter. The only question left was whether she felt like explaining.

Lapis shrugged. “I’m sorry to betray your expectations, but all I know is this: Miss Scena is suspicious. The symptoms Mr. Brosse and the others are presently recovering from are a product of energy drain. And I hardly have to tell you how downright dubious we should find Ms. Stehr. Nothing more, and nothing less.”

Loren had thought she would dig in her heels and tease him, but she offered what she knew with surprising ease. The thing that caught him truly off guard was the term “energy drain.”

As with most things related to the arcane, Loren only had a vague idea of what it meant, but as he understood it, energy drain was a special ability possessed by high-ranking undead: the power to absorb the life force and magic of the living, making them into one’s own power. Those killed by energy drain were never granted a peaceful end—they were cursed to walk the earth as undead.

“Wait, do you think Scena’s doing that?”

“That would be the obvious conclusion, seeing how the phenomenon has only affected those who spent time in proximity to her. However, from what I can tell, Miss Scena is human. A rather ordinary human at that.”

“In that case...”

“That’s the part I don’t get. There’s a chance some other powerful undead is

stalking us, but that's hard to believe."

The most well-known examples of high-ranking undead were blood-sucking vampires and liches, who were said to be the remnants of powerful magicians. If one of those had been on their heels during this journey, surely they would have noticed it by now. The presence of such entities was inescapably palpable.

"In any case, the actions I've taken have all been under the assumption that Miss Scena is suspicious. I've distanced her from the others, and just in case, I've cast a ward against evil on the sickroom."

"You did?" Loren was taken by surprise once again. Evil-warding charms were known to keep away demonic entities, and Lapis was, well, a demon. A demon using anti-demon measures? He couldn't help but take it as a bad joke.

"We are the race most proficient at handling our own kind. As with most races, I would assume." She sounded somewhat offended.

"Really?"

"And, of course, these safety measures can be cast on humans as well."

As she said this, she smugly put a hand on his head. Loren abruptly recalled that she had done something similar at the campsite two nights before—when he had invited Scena to join them because the adventurers were shunning her. Specifically, she had placed a hand on his forehead while telling him he could do what he wanted.

"Hey, don't tell me you're the reason I haven't collapsed yet."

"Incidentally, the reason I haven't gone down is because my prosthetic hand has the ward function built in," she said. "As for Mr. Claes...perhaps he owes it to his aptitude as a hero or some such nonsense."

Her tone turned incredibly skeptical where Claes was concerned. That aside, Lapis had cleared up quite a few of Loren's questions.

"What about Stehr?" he asked.

"If you happen to find a lone survivor in an otherwise lifeless town, please view her with due suspicion. She's practically screaming '*I am untrustworthy.*' To the point, is she really even a survivor?"

“And the reason you’re keeping them in the same general area, despite putting them in separate rooms?”

All other circumstances aside, their ultimate goal was to return Scena to her parents. There was only one reason Loren could think of to place someone so fishy near her without any guards: to use Scena as the bait. However, if that was the case, he couldn’t just shrug and go with it.

“No need for you to worry about it, Mr. Loren. Just leave the dirty work to me. I am a demon, you see.”

Hopefully, Lapis had made sure Claes wasn’t in earshot before saying that. All the same, Loren’s hands finally stopped.

“Mr. Loren?”

“Don’t put it like that. It doesn’t matter who you are. We’re partners for now.”

For a moment, Lapis wore a vacant expression, as if she couldn’t understand what he’d said. Then her eyes wandered, swimming away from Loren, further and further until her whole body had turned, and he could only see her back.

“Lapis?”

“Y-yes, well. Rather than partners, should we say I’m your employer, or rather, your debt collector, or—”

“Pick whichever one you want. Just don’t keep it all in. We should discuss these things.”

Lapis turned back at these blunt and awkward words, a bashful smile on her face. “You’re right. Then I’ll play along a bit.”

You should’ve done that from the start. He sighed.

Once again, Lapis looked down at the considerable number of silver pieces in his bag and asked, “So in the end, what are you going to use those for?”

“Basic throwing knives. Should be enough for a revenant.”

No sooner had the words left Loren’s mouth than a distant roar cut the air. Claes heard it too; he hurried back to the clinic from the barricades.

For himself, Loren returned his sword to his back, knowing he wouldn't be getting any sleep that night.

Where had they been hiding? Loren couldn't know the answer for certain, but he could guess.

They had presumably come from beneath the city, away from anywhere any human might venture. To be more specific, he suspected they had been in the sewers.

Zombies and revenants had some resistance to sunlight, but that didn't mean they reveled in it. Ghosts and wraiths, who the sun disintegrated, naturally gathered where its light couldn't reach. Thus, the sewers.

Loren had searched Hansa quite thoroughly but hadn't considered wading through wastewater and sewage. Too dark, dirty, and foul. But none of those concerns mattered to the undead. Unlike in life, they were wholly indifferent to such things.

"I don't like this one bit," he muttered.

The groans echoing down the streets grew louder the moment the last sliver of sun disappeared. Slowly, the sounds blanketed the entire city.

A defensive barricade surrounded the clinic, and intermittent bonfires ensured they had a clear field of view. If they had been dealing with living humans, their best bet would have been to snuff the lights and lay low. This tactic would do nothing for them with the undead, who were drawn to the presence and warmth of the living. The fires might actually distract them.

Regardless, the dark had set in, and night favored the dead.

"This is gonna be a pain. You ready?" Loren asked, a sword over his shoulder. Claes silently nodded.

He's pretty tense, Loren thought, though it was understandable. They had no way to know how many undead remained in town, but they could well be in the realm of hundreds, thousands even. Given that, it was impressive Claes had any will to fight at all.

“If we go down, everybody in the clinic is done for. Keep that in your head.”

“I know. You don’t have to tell me.” A faint light coated Claes’s arms. It seeped into his armor and weapon until he glowed like a feeble torch himself.

“That’s convenient. What I wouldn’t give...”

“It’s not entirely enviable,” Lapis interjected.

She had been evil-warding the rest of the clinic, protecting it from any undead incursion. If she could do something like that, Loren wondered why she hadn’t done it for every adventurer taking part in the original expedition. When he’d asked, she replied, “That sounds like it would have been a lot of work.”

“Mr. Claes’s gift is certainly effective. But to the dead, he’s a most radiant beacon. They’ll head straight for him.”

According to Lapis, the undead were principally moved by resentment and envy, but they were also attracted to mana and vitality. Claes’s gift drew straight from his own life force, which made him a prime target.

“Just what I want,” Claes said through gritted teeth. “I’ll send them all back to hell. They won’t lay a finger on my comrades.”

“I doubt the dead want to be here either,” Loren said, taking a freshly forged silver knife from his pocket. Abruptly, he held it up and threw.

The blade spun through the air before stabbing deep into the first zombie to appear. The zombie jolted to a stop, then fell limp.

They really are lurking, thought Loren. “Come to think of it, if they’re coming from the sewers, they’re not gonna climb out of the clinic privy, are they?”

“Don’t worry,” said Lapis. “I made doubly sure to seal that point of access.”

The undead didn’t take filth into consideration when they chose a crevice to crawl through. As Loren feared, they were indeed capable of squirming out of such unsanitary holes.

“So if anyone wakes up with a need, where are they supposed to go?”

“They will simply have to put up with it.” Lapis shrugged. “I nailed them shut too. They aren’t opening anytime soon.”

“I just don’t wanna be attacked from behind,” Loren muttered as he threw another knife. This time, the blade pierced a host of ghosts oozing through a wall. They raised a chorus of shrill shrieks as they dissipated into the dark.

Ghosts, who had no physical form, couldn’t be defeated with conventional weapons but were easily banished with the evil-warding properties of silver. Their lack of corporeal form meant that unlike with zombies, a single knife could take out a whole line of them.

“May the lost find their way to where they belong. *Turn Undead.*”

Lapis brandished the sigil of the god of knowledge and chanted from scripture. Yet another group of hazy white ghosts vanished—this time silently.

Turn Undead was a power priests possessed, different from blessings. While the use of it did whittle away at the practitioner’s mind and body, it had no set usage limit. Its power was proportional to the priest’s faith, and despite what she said, Lapis was evidently a devout follower. Her prayers felled not only ghosts but also zombies, who crumpled on the spot.

“Not as many friends as I was expecting,” Loren said as his knives took out another two.

He had foreseen an onslaught more akin to the one he’d encountered in the ancient ruin—a veritable avalanche of goblins. There were a lot of undead, to be sure. They slowly surrounded the clinic, and he saw fields of rotting heads stretched out down the road. But he didn’t feel nearly as cornered.

“Don’t speak too soon. Look over there.” Lapis pointed at Claes, who was swarmed by a wall of zombies several layers thick. If they managed to fully surround him, he would certainly be bitten. Luckily, he could take out a whole wave of them with each swing, and he quickly eliminated any who got close enough.

“I suppose they’re just concentrated on him.”

“He really does stand out. Guess I should pitch in.” The knife Loren threw stabbed through a few undead on the outer ring. As they fell, immobile, they were trampled underfoot by the next wave.

“How many of those did you make?” Lapis asked.

“Around thirty. I had the time, not the material.”

It was pointless to conserve anything. Not only were the blades haphazardly made, they would also remain as evidence for certain money-melting-related misdeeds, so Loren was all too eager to chuck them with wild abandon.

“Hey! Wait! That one grazed me!” Claes yelped.

“Whoops, sorry. They’re pretty lopsided, and the aim’s way off.”

“If you’ve got time to throw those, then help with your sword!”

“I’m just a mercenary.”

Nonetheless, Loren begrudgingly took his stance with the black greatsword, power concentrated in his hips. One step in, and he unleashed an upward swing on the zombies surrounding Claes. It looked like Claes had something to say—but once that massive weight was unleashed, it wasn’t going to stop.

Of course, Loren had no intentions of hitting the boy. His attack captured a corner of the surrounding zombies, turning them into blood-splatter and flesh.

“Would it be selfish of me to ask you to think a bit before you attacked?” Claes asked, his voice quivering as the wind gusted behind his back.

While Loren’s momentum managed to take out several zombies at once, the blood and viscera had scattered everywhere, and Claes was right in the splash zone. He was now drenched in red and indescribable remains.

“Ah, sorry...”

“Ugh... It stinks, and it’s all sticky...” Despite his complaints, Claes never stopped moving. Even though he swung in a way that would have ruined a normal sword, his *Boost* gift prevented his blade from breaking or bending, and he continued to slice with the same unyielding edge.

The undead continued to flock to Claes like moths to a flame. Loren and Lapis had an exceedingly easy job, taking out the stragglers, i.e., the ones that ignored Claes in favor of the clinic.

“You know, he’s actually pretty good. All things considered,” said Loren.

“Yes, well, those so gifted can become incredibly skilled, depending on how

they deploy their talents.”

“Quit being impressed and help—ugh, dammit!” There were many more things Loren wanted to say, but no matter how many undead he cut down, the next always came, and he found himself fighting without the leisure for words.

He didn’t just keep an eye on Claes either. He moved the corpses Claes cut down so they wouldn’t get in the way of the next horde, piling up the unmoving dead as he continued to take out strays.

“On every battlefield, there are always a handful of folks who die tripping on the enemy’s corpses. It’s important to have good footing,” Loren explained.

“I see, how edifying,” Lapis said, diligently taking notes.

Claes groaned and forcefully cut through another swathe of undead. “Oh, come on!”

A massive crash interrupted his complaint—the clinic wall facing them was blown open from the inside. Claes froze, shocked. Lapis and Loren took out a swathe of undead who hurtled toward him in that moment, but Lapis then turned toward the clinic.

“What happened?!” Claes shouted.

His question was answered soon enough. A figure—surely the perpetrator—stepped through the hole in the clinic wall, cradling Scena’s limp, unconscious body in its hands.

“Hey, Lapis. What happened to that evil-warding spell of yours?”

“Evil-wards ward off evil. They don’t make buildings any sturdier.”

Lapis’s evil-wards prevented evil entities such as undead from getting close, but that was it. They didn’t offer any physical protection.

“On top of that, they were meant to stop things from getting inside. They don’t work when something wants out.”

“That’s surprisingly useless,” Loren said, somewhat disappointed.

“They’ve kept you on your feet, Mr. Loren.” Lapis stared at him long and hard, and he looked away, pretending he had said nothing.

“The clinic was breached!” Claes yelled at them as he cut down a flock of undead. “Worry a bit, would you?!”

“Even if you tell me to worry...” Loren’s eyes locked on the figure on the other side of the destroyed clinic wall. “Seeing that thing brings me all the way back around to—I don’t know what. I can’t even be surprised anymore.”

The figure was human in form. It appeared to be a normal woman in streetwear. Had Loren passed her in any other town, she wouldn’t have left an impression. The thing that made her stand out now was the yellow haze wafting around her entire body like mist. The sight of it froze his spine—it made him sick. The figure also held Scena in her arms, and she stared at them with eyes of the same awful yellow hue.

“That’s quite a transformation there, Stehr.” Loren said.

Her lips curled into a smile, her brown hair swaying.

“I knew you were suspicious, but I didn’t think you’d given up on being human.”

He didn’t know what she should be called, but that unpleasant aura and ominous haze made it impossible to believe she could possibly be counted as a member of humankind.

Stehr stepped out through the hole she’d created and expressionlessly passed right into the swarm of zombies. A normal human would have been dogpiled and covered in bite marks, but it was as if the zombies couldn’t see Stehr.

“What are you going to do to Miss Scena?” Lapis asked as if merely curious.

Stehr stopped and answered without turning. “That’s none of your concern. The girl is the one the master spied, and upon whom he bestowed a great treasure. The master is gone now, but I have a duty to fulfill his objective.”

“She actually spoke,” Loren muttered in surprise.

Zombies could no longer command human tongues. Moreover, while revenants had some intellect and might groan what sounded like a word, it was impossible to have a meaningful conversation with them. Loren knew that much, and he had been sure you just couldn’t talk to undead, period. But given

how the zombies weren't attacking Stehr...she had to be undead as well, right?

"She's probably a wight," said Lapis. "They're a little smarter than revenants."

"Are undead differentiated by their intelligence?"

"No, not exactly."

As if to cut Lapis off, the yellow mist suddenly burst forth from Stehr's body, covering the entire area. Loren readied himself to lose his vision, but this mist wasn't a smokescreen. It was something far worse.

"Wights can use a powerful energy drain," warned Lapis. "If you touch that mist, your mana and life force will be snatched away."

"I have no business with you. Feel free to become zombie feed—is what I was going to say, but..." Here, Stehr finally turned toward them, doubt written over her face. "Normal humans should have been rendered immobile by that. Why are you still moving?"

"Because of my countermeasures, of course," said Lapis. She seemed proud of herself, but Loren had to wonder how meaningful it was to take that attitude with the undead.

Regardless, though Stehr stared at them a while, she was soon back on her way. "No matter. You won't last long against these numbers. Even if you survive, no human may oppose me once I complete the master's work."

"Oi, wait!" Loren called to stop her, but there were countless zombies between them, and she soon disappeared into the crowd. She was as good as gone.

"This may be bad," said Lapis thoughtfully. Even with Stehr gone, the yellow mist didn't disappear. It lingered like fog. "Claes and I should be fine—I'd never fold to energy drain, and Claes has his gift."

"You mean I'm the problem?"

"The ward I put on you raised your resistance, but if you stay within range of the effect for too long, you'll either succumb or the ward will wear off."

Lapis's ward didn't cut off the energy drain, it just heightened Loren's resistance to it, so he didn't feel its effects. Adding that onto his natural

resistance, he had lasted for an impressively long time. But here in the mist, the constant exposure would inevitably bring him to his limit.

He could always run outside the mist before it took him down, but if he did, he wouldn't be able to hunt down the source.

"So I'm running against the clock now. No way around it."

"I see you still intend to chase her."

It seemed securing Scena had been Stehr's sole objective. She hadn't remotely implied that she would hunt them if they fled. Sure, they would have to break through the zombies to get free, but running would still be far easier than going after a wight.

"She was going on about her master's work," said Loren. "I don't know what that means, but we're gonna have trouble if she gets any stronger."

"If this really gets out of hand, I get the feeling some country out there will do something about it eventually," said Lapis. "But I suppose there's nothing to lose in nipping it in the bud."

"Besides, you saw this coming, didn't you?"

"I knew Ms. Stehr would do something troublesome. She had a strange air, but I didn't think she was a *wight*." Lapis had likely only let someone so clearly problematic into their midst because she hoped Stehr would lead them to the truth of the matter. That didn't mean she'd known the woman was dead. "The stronger an undead becomes, the better they are at concealing themselves."

"Sounds problematic."

"So, going after her is fine and all, but what do we do about the clinic?"

If Loren went for Stehr, it would leave them less able to protect the clinic's patients. There was a tremendous number of undead around, and it would take quite some time to wipe them out before pursuing anyone. By the time they were done, Stehr would likely already have achieved her goal.

"Count on me," Claes broke in. "The clinic's defenses are still holding, right? I can attract any of the undead who come near. And if I stand in front of that hole in the wall and continue beating them back, I should be able to protect the

rest of the building.”

“Well, maybe. But you’d be fighting until daybreak alone.”

When the sun rose, most of the undead would return to their hiding spots. But there was quite a bit of time until then. If Claes faltered even once before that moment, the undead would pour in through the hole Stehr had made. Then the fate of those still bedridden would be sealed.

“I’ll do it for my comrades. Leave it to me. That’s what I’d like to say, anyway, but it’ll be rough. So, it, uh, it would be a huge lifesaver if you could get back here after beating up that wight.”

Loren and Lapis exchanged a look and then said in unison: “Your tone kinda ticks me off.”

“I-I can apologize when I have to! And I owe you for saving Ange.” Claes’s words faded into a murmur at the latter, though his expression then tensed. He looked them up and down anew, and he spoke with conviction. “Please, leave this to me.”

“Well, if you’re that resolved, I guess I can hand it over,” said Loren.

Claes smacked a hand to his chest, brimming with confidence. If this were the first time they’d met, Loren would have snorted and thought, *What are you acting so high and mighty for?* But at that moment, he felt that Claes was up to the task.

“Yeah, I promise I’ll protect them until you return,” said Claes.

“Treat me to a beer when this is all over,” said Loren.

“Shouldn’t you be treating me...?”

“Don’t got the money for that. Work’s been so bad lately I became an adventurer of all things.”

Before Loren could tell his pitiful tale, Lapis grabbed his hand and dragged him off. “We’re in a hurry. I can track Ms. Stehr if we’re quick, so let’s hop to it.”

“Got it. You better not die, Claes.”

Those encouraging words were met with a renewed resolve as Claes firmly

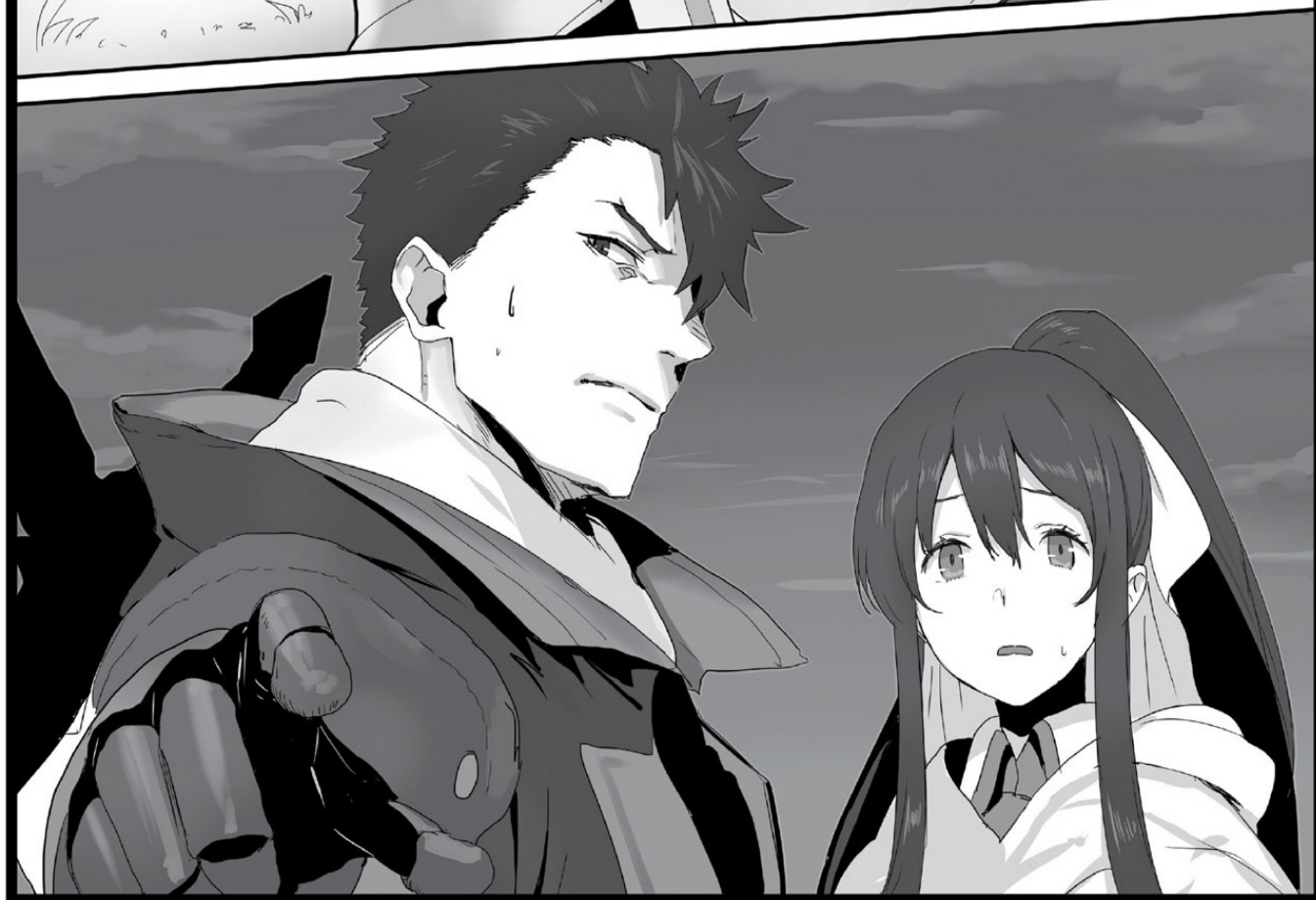
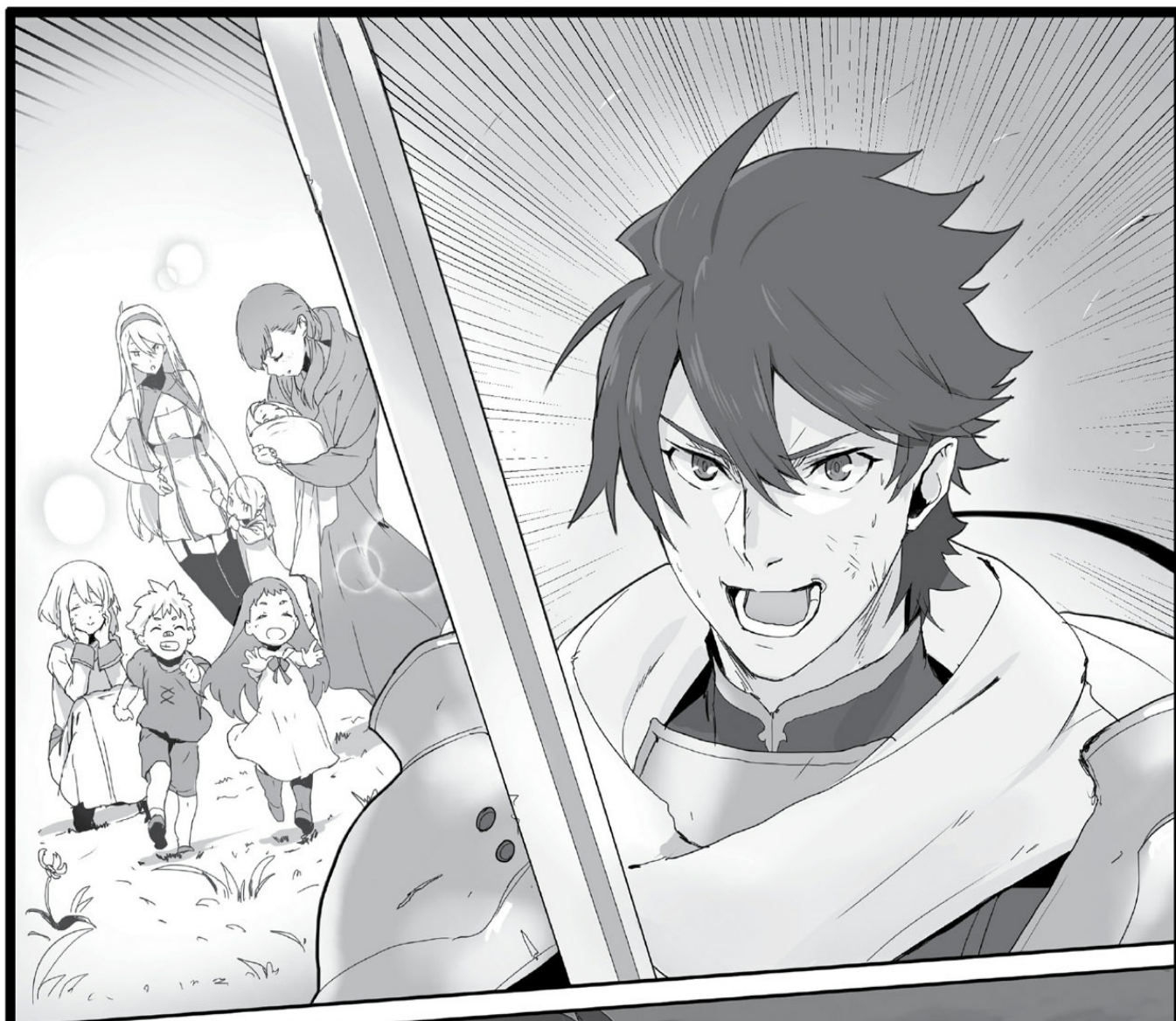
gripped his longsword. "Sorry to say, I plan on raising a household with Ange. We'll have loads of kids, and even more grandkids, and I'm going to die with them tending to me on my sickbed."

"That's quite a grand dream."

"Oh, and Laure and Leila as my mistresses," Claes blurted out with a gleam in his eyes.

"Maybe that guy's better off dying here," Loren said with considerable earnestness.

Lapis didn't say anything. She only sent Claes a look colder than a blizzard from the frigid plains, then took Loren's hand and ran.



Chapter 5:

Charge to Oblivion

LOREN AND LAPIS dashed through the night. They had been able to see when they were near the clinic thanks to the bonfires, but they had to rely on the moon and stars once they got too far away.

They sprinted at near full speed, taking out any zombies they encountered on the way—those wandering the streets and lurking in the shadows.

“I know my eyes are special,” Lapis said, sounding rather impressed, “but—and this has occurred to me before, Mr. Loren—*your* eyes are incredible.”

On their previous job, Loren had to run through a pitch-black cave with Lapis on his back. “It’s because I’m used to it,” he demurred.

In Loren’s experience, anything could happen on the battlefield. Surprise attacks and night raids were common occurrences, and if you wanted to stay alive, developing good night vision was essential. Loren, like many others in his company, had practiced moving in spaces with no light from a rather early age.

“The problem is, the undead have no *presence*,” he muttered. “They’re hard to sense.”

“I can’t believe you’re still finding them despite that.”

Undead were—of course—not living beings, and it was terribly difficult to detect them using cues for human life. The way they suddenly burst out of the darkness before Loren sensed them kept him on edge. He could at least make them out once they started moving; it helped that they were relatively slow, and so far, he had managed to fight them off. He still kept himself ready for the possibility of a lethal blow at any time.

“Why do I put up with these things?” Loren cursed as his swing split open a zombie coming from around the corner. He heard the damp splatter across the street but couldn’t tell what flew where. For this, at least, he thanked the night—in the dark, he didn’t have to see any unpleasant sights and colors.

“Can you make a magic light?” he asked.

“If I put up a light in this lightless city, we’d be practically screaming out our position.”

“And who’s gonna hear it out here?”

By this point, Loren was quite sure there were no living people around. At least, going off the number of undead. That would also explain why every undead in Hansa seemed to be concentrated on them. If there were other survivors, they would have distracted the swarm.

“At the very least, I think Ms. Stehr will notice. The zombies are already quite troublesome; it would be terrible if she sent a bone dragon after us next.”

“When that happens, we run.”

“Leaving Miss Scena behind?”

Loren didn’t know how to respond. His mercenary brain told him to abandon the girl. But when he asked himself if he could really do that, doubt rose. “Yeah, I’ll consider it if we get to that point...”

“Aren’t you dodging the question?”

He was, and he turned sullen as she pointed it out. However, Lapis didn’t tread any further. Her lips were sealed, waiting for his answer. But the conversation was over. He was left with little choice but to revive a prior talking point.

“Do you think this mess will be solved if we defeat Stehr?”

“I doubt it.” Her response was brutal in its simplicity, and Loren couldn’t help but swallow his breath. She went on as if it were nothing to cry over. “We likely owe this incident to a perpetrator, yes. But that wouldn’t be Ms. Stehr. I assume it is the ‘master’ she spoke of. I still don’t know what’s going on, but presumably, that person tried to do something to Miss Scena, failed, and left.”

“By the sound of it.”

“Thus, this mass outbreak of undead is also presumably the work of that master. And he’s not here. Ms. Stehr is just one of the undead he created. Neutralizing her won’t stop the others.”

Lapis made this dire proclamation so nonchalantly. At present, they couldn’t

know how many people of the city-state and its encompassing region had turned undead, but given the present state of the city, it was safe to say their numbers exceeded ten thousand. Should so many undead start to rise up in earnest, it would far surpass the realm of what Loren alone could handle. It would take nations and armies years to clean up the mess.

“Two on the right.”

Loren’s mind was on the verge of shutting down entirely, but there were zombies to deal with, and on Lapis’s warning, he cut them both down with one swing of his sword. “You’re not joking here.”

“I certainly am not. To tell you the truth, the scenario I paint here is based on the most optimistic assumption of the least number of casualties.”

There’s more? Loren frowned at her.

Not that Lapis seemed to notice. She shrugged as she ran. “I’m curious about what exactly was done to Miss Scena. A wight is already rather troublesome. If something even worse appears, these zombies and revenants would be cute by comparison.”

“I don’t think they’ll ever be cute,” Loren said, cutting down another. He heard its liquids spatter into the dark alley, then swung his blade again to remove the fluids he suspected were stuck to it. “It really gets you down, fighting nothing but undead.”

“Thank goodness it’s night. It would be worse during the day.”

Although night was when undead called on their true strength, they had more than one reason to be thankful for it. Hansa’s undead had been alive not so long ago—they still looked much the same as they had in life.

Lapis didn’t seem to care about this much, being the demon she was, but the thought of the undead haunted Loren enough without having to see the dead children included in their number. If he ever did see just who he was cutting through, he suspected “feeling down” would be the least of his worries.

Although the most conspicuous place in town was the dual attraction of the bonfires and Claes, wielding his power as he saw fit, a considerable number of undead continued to lunge at Loren and Lapis as they ran through the dark

streets. The size of the swarm increased the closer they got to the city center. Loren's focus was naturally fixed on fighting, but Lapis continued to think.

"It just occurred to me, Mr. Loren."

"What? I've got a bad feeling about this, but go on."

"At the moment we should be the only living people in town, right? Counting Claes, of course."

"Don't like how you're writing off Brosse and the girls like that."

Lapis might have been willing to dismiss those with a low chance of survival, but Loren wanted very much for them to live and refused to forget about them.

"Let me rephrase. Currently, we are the only ones conscious and aware of the situation. Counting Claes, of course."

"Unless you count the enemy and Scena."

"To the point, does this perhaps mean there are no witnesses?"

Now that gave Loren a truly bad feeling.

Sure enough, there were only undead around, and they were the only living ones in all of Hansa. Claes was doing his best to remain in that category as well, but he was already far off in the distance—too far for either party to see the other.

"What about it?" Loren asked.

"I was thinking—perhaps it wouldn't be an issue if I got a little serious. What do you think?" Lapis asked.

Loren gave it some thought. That didn't mean he stopped cutting down the stream of undead rushing toward him, but he worked this through his head when he could, and he reached his conclusion after a few waves. "I don't think you should. I'm getting nothing but bad vibes about it."

"Oh, it'll be fine."

Despite the complete darkness, they exchanged a look. In that brief instant, Loren could tell there would be no convincing her. Yet he hung on, knowing full well he should give up.

“No way. My sword can handle this for us, no problem. Don’t force yourself. I mean, I guess it would be a different story if something I couldn’t handle came up.”

The moment Loren said this, an intense tremor roiled up from the ground. While Loren braced his legs to hold his stance, staring down in disbelief, Lapis for some reason seemed unutterably delighted.

“Something you couldn’t handle—you mean, like a bone dragon?”

He sighed. “I jinxed it.”

What was it they said? *Speak of the devil, and he doth appear*. But by the time Loren realized he shouldn’t have said it, it was too late.

The tremors grew as cracks formed in the pavement. A few nearby buildings came down when, with a piercing cry, the head of that damn bone dragon they had encountered before burst from the ground.

As it did, Lapis changed. Her calm expression took on a sharp belligerence. Even her tone changed. “My skills are gonna rust if I don’t get serious now and then.”

She raised her right palm toward the draconic remains. “Through the river of lament, down to the abyss. Should thou wish to knock upon heaven’s door, let thy sins be judged in crimson flame. *Purgatorio*.”

Loren’s entire field of vision was drenched in red. Everything else was gone. No roar or scream, or even the sound of something falling apart. Any and everything before him simply vanished in an encompassing crimson blaze.

“What...was...?”

Loren had seen magic before, but nothing he’d ever experienced had remotely resembled what he’d just borne witness to.

“You better stay behind me,” Lapis whispered.

Then the blinding red was gone as suddenly as it had appeared. It blinked away so cleanly that Loren had to wonder if the inferno had ever existed at all. But the consequences told him otherwise.

“You have got to be kidding me.”

Everything was gone. The stones of the pavement, the surrounding buildings, the bone dragon that had sprouted from the ground, and the undead that had been swarming. Gone, without rhyme or reason, and nothing but a scorched crater remained.

He couldn't yet know the scope of the destruction, but it was undoubtedly vast—and had been nigh instantaneous.

"What did I tell you? I'm losing my knack for controlling it..." Lapis sighed. "But I got to use my full strength for the first time in forever, so I'm satisfied."

"What was that?"

"The highest form of fire magic. But I couldn't quite control it with my artificial hands. If, at the very least, I had my own eyes, I could have increased the scope a bit without issue."

This was the contained version? Loren had nothing to say to that. Undead were fundamentally weak to fire, true, but Loren had never heard of a magician who could take out a dragon in one hit.

"What would've happened if you used that one at full strength? And hey, wait a minute, do you even need me?"

"Oh, Mr. Loren, what a joker you are. I can't use that spell in enclosed spaces, nor when the battlefield is too jumbled. It's flashy and has a high output, but that's all it has going for it. *Of course* I need you." Lapis stepped into the crater she'd created.

Loren at first worried that following her would singe his feet. However, all he felt beneath his steps was dirt—not even that hot at that. The absence of logic perplexed him.

"Not to mention, I'm a priest. It would be all sorts of trouble if anyone found out I could use magic like that. It's fine on these special occasions but not regularly. Ah, that blew off some steam." Lapis stretched her back.

Loren knew she never answered his question—she'd certainly not told him what would happen if she deployed that spell at full force. He didn't really have time delve into it just now, but he swore he would do what it took to stop her the next time she suggested she use magic to distress.

The area destroyed by Lapis's magic was vast. However, it was longer than it was wide, stretching straight toward the city center nearly all the way to their destination. The sheer extent of destruction gave Loren the chills.

Lapis walked through the aftermath holding light at her fingertips to get a better view—the very light she'd said would have given away their position.

"Why is it okay now?" asked Loren.

"I already fired off that powerful spell. Anyone with half a brain should know full well where we are by now," she said, making it sound like it was of little consequence.

That left the question he simply had to ask. "Then why did you use it?"

"Heh." After a brief silence, Lapis stuck out her tongue. She fully intended to brush it off.

"Don't 'heh' me."

"Oh, but I wouldn't have been able to overpower a bone dragon without magic on that level. It was a necessity, I assure you." Lapis's expression turned serious again, but Loren's skeptical eyes remained trained on her.

"And the truth of the matter?"

"The slightly weaker *Firestorm* might have worked," she admitted.

But, it seemed, she'd really been feeling the pain of holding back for far too long. She'd needed to get this out of her system and so used the flashiest possible magic in her arsenal. By this point it felt plain idiotic to get on her case any further, and that was the end of the matter.

"That was magic. It had nothing to do with your blessing reserves, right?"

"Nothing at all. They're completely separate. I have three blessings to offer, same as ever."

"Didn't it used to be two?"

"I've grown a bit."

Loren didn't understand what skill a priest had to develop for that capacity to grow, but if Lapis's count really had increased, it was cause for celebration.

Suffice to say, the number of times he could afford to get hurt had gone up by one. He decided to just be satisfied with that.

“Let’s get going.”

Lapis grinned. “A wonderful decision.”

It was said the undead didn’t know fear. However, Loren had to wonder if Lapis’s display of raw power might have finally inspired that emotion in their foes. They met no undead for the rest of the journey, arriving at the chancellor’s estate without issue.

Loren had assumed that, being a ruler, the chancellor would live in a castle. The estate they found was definitely better built than the houses of the other residents but not quite what he was expecting. There was a moat, then a rather high wall. Beyond it, a structure that reminded him of a fort in the middle of nowhere.

There would usually be soldiers stationed to guard the bridge over the moat, but no one remained to do so. They passed over the unmanned bridge and passed again through the unmanned gate. They came to a stop in the courtyard.

“How reckless. To think you’d come all the way here,” said the wight waiting for them.

Bonfires blazed in every corner of the courtyard, giving them a full view of everything in it. Smack-dab in the center of it all was a stone platform like an altar. Scena had been laid limply on top of it. She was dressed in a white shift just like she had worn when they found her in the forest, while Stehr wore a black robe over what she had been wearing before. It looked like a sacrificial ceremony to some heretical god.

“You’ve got terrible taste,” said Loren, holding his sword at the ready. “What are you up to?”

“I will henceforth complete the work the master left to me.”

“Who’s this master of yours, and what do you want to do with a small child, you pervert?” he asked.

Stehr's face twitched, and Lapis snickered. She covered her mouth, her shoulders shaking as she did her best to contain it.

Loren kept laying into Stehr. "Never mind, I've got no interest in what a pervert has to say. I'm sure your master was a great pervert who taught you well, but can you go along and take your degeneracy back to hell? You being undead and all."

"Wh-what insolence! You unlearned savage!"

"Yeah, I can't deny that, but I've got enough good sense not to lay a hand on a child. Which means you're beneath the savage. Pervert."

"Age has nothing to do with it! This girl had the aptitude!"

No blood flowed through Stehr's undead body. Her complexion remained pale even when she flew into a rage, but her mouth did twist, and her eyes filled with hatred. Loren met her glare head-on.

Then Lapis intruded. "What aptitude would that be? I'm a little interested. In the first place, what was the treasure your master gave to that girl?"

"A dog like you could never understand!"

"I may not look the part, but I am a priest to the god of knowledge. If this was such an outstanding arcane masterpiece, I would love to hear all about it."

Lapis pressed the back of her hand against Loren's chest as if telling him to leave this to her. Indeed, the moment Stehr opened her mouth to object, Lapis interrupted again.

"You're not going to tell me you're *unable* to explain, are you? If the woman completing her great master's great work didn't understand it well enough to explain it, I would have to assume that she didn't understand what she was doing either."

"What?!"

"Putting aside whether or not *we* can understand, *you* should at least be able to explain, shouldn't you?"

Stehr met Lapis's challenge with a smile and a belittling laugh. "Trying to buy time, are you? Very well. There is no escape for you, and the preparations are

already complete. If you want to know about my master's great work so badly, I'll tell you."

Loren wanted to cut her down then and there, but Lapis's arm held him back with unimaginable strength. What the hell was she thinking?

"This girl has an affinity with a treasure the master possessed," said Stehr. "She is uniquely compatible with the Orb of Undeath."

Loren glanced at Lapis, who shook her head. She always seemed like she knew everything, but this thing seemed to be unknown even to her.

"It is the product of his research, and it drinks the lives of others to bestow upon the bearer a power that can conquer death itself."

Fortunately, Stehr went on without being prompted. Lapis's interest was piqued; she focused on Stehr with a look of profound curiosity.

"The master bestowed the power unto me as well...but I did not have the aptitude. I was left in limbo, half-complete." Stehr's tone dropped. She hadn't been able to meet her master's expectations. Wights were certainly hard to kill but not invincible. Her voice picked back up as she went on. "But his research will bear fruit in this city! The girl he selected was perfectly compatible, and thus he bestowed his orb upon her, certain he would reap perfect results."

"She's saying that someone out there was researching death, made a magic artifact, and tried to produce certain results. But the original test subject wasn't up to par, so he ended up with something half-baked. Meanwhile, he found a better test subject in Miss Scena and pulled a few strings to get at her. Apparently."

"Yeah. I followed. You didn't have to explain it again."

"Oh, really... Ah, Ms. Stehr. There's just one last loose thread. By your story, all this should have ended the moment Miss Scena was found and used as a test subject."

Stehr's expression clouded. "My master is no god. He made one miscalculation."

Loren snorted. "Well, he already produced one failure. I think that's more

than one miscalculation.”

“Quiet, Mr. Loren. A miscalculation, you say?” asked Lapis, who couldn’t bear to have Stehr’s mood ruined lest the conversation be cut short.

Luckily, Loren’s whisper hadn’t reached the wight. “The child lacked the emotional fortitude to maintain her sanity as the power of death flowed into her,” said Stehr.

“What’s that mean?”

“That orb apparently drinks life force in order to turn the target into a specific sort of undead... Did you really think a child could endure that?” Lapis asked.

The feeling of something foreign being inserted into one’s body—the sensation of having one’s self remade as an unliving entity. Even if Loren couldn’t understand exactly what it felt like, he could tell it would be terrifying, horrendous, and beyond even what an adult could bear.

“So her body rejected this orb,” said Lapis.

“Precisely. Before the process completed, she cast *Teleport* out of desperation and vanished.”

“Miss Scena knows *Teleport*? ...Oh, I see. She was halfway there.”

“Lapis, explain.”

“When she was in the process of turning undead, she rejected the orb and used the undead abilities she had incompletely obtained to flee. Since she probably didn’t set coordinates, it would be more accurate to say she cast *Random Teleport*.”

“You’re the one who said Scena was human.”

Lapis looked slightly apologetic. “She was in the process, as in not undead *yet*. Even now, Miss Scena would qualify as human. The thing killing the adventurers who rode with her was the orb inside her.”

That artifact that drank the life force of humans. As long as Scena carried it within her, she would continue to steal lives even if she was unaware of doing it.

“Wait, don’t tell me...” Lapis turned back to Stehr. “The power you poured into Miss Scena came from the people of Hansa... How many lives did you take?”

“Any success requires some sacrifice. Even more to ensure greater success.”

“This is the worst...the worst.” Lapis covered her face.

Loren looked between her and Stehr, uncomprehending.

“We can assume nearly everyone in Hansa had their life force eaten away, turning them into low-ranking undead,” said Lapis. “The power reaped from them was injected into Scena, and given the amount of energy and the magic she used when she rejected it...she’s going to become quite powerful.”

“Any way to stop it?” Loren asked.

“It was already too late when we got here. You heard Stehr. She’s already finished preparing.”

“Precisely. It’s all over, and this moment, this instant is when I will finally feast my eyes upon the work’s completion!”

As Stehr raised her arms high to the sky, a dazzling white light overflowed from Scena’s chest. Instead of heat, it emanated a chill that made even Loren shudder.

“Isn’t that pretty bad?” he growled.

“Yes, quite. Without exaggeration, we are rather screwed.” There was something unpleasant in Lapis’s voice. She released Loren’s chest, clenched her fist, and glared at the wight who had begun to laugh like a madwoman. “You’re definitely not going to die a decent death.”

“I won’t die. Not until I bring these results to the master! Now celebrate with me. Kneel before his work and offer your lives.”

The light overflowing from Scena grew even stronger. Loren had to hold up his arms to save his eyes from searing away, but thanks to her artificial eyes, Lapis continued to stare, unperturbed.

“Spring forth from her soul! One who has conquered death! *Lifeless King!*”

In that moment, Loren felt a stake of ice hammered into his heart.

The hem of Scena's dress swayed as she floated into the air. Her golden locks, which had previously gleamed with the luster of youth, had lost all their gloss. Her hollow, half-open eyes would not focus, and her small, slack mouth leaked a ceaseless cry that, while faint, made Loren want to cover his ears. Her skin had gone a sickly white and emitted a constant stream of equally white haze. It ran along her body, then to the altar, and then the ground.

Whatever had given off the initial light continued to glow faintly in Scena's chest, its glimmer raising goosebumps on Loren's skin.

"Yes... This is what the master wished for... A true lord of the dead..." Stehr's voice trembled with delight. She was long dead. She couldn't feel the dread that overpowered the living.

"The worst. Yes, truly the worst." Grinding her teeth, Lapis retreated a step as if forced back by Scena's mere presence.

Stehr's voice quivered as she declared her victory. "It's over! The time has come for all to prostrate themselves before the master's work!"

"It's a bit of an overstatement to say one *Lifeless King* would end the world... Perhaps if he mass-produced them. But there's a glaring hole in your logic." Lapis held up a finger.

The *Lifeless King* hadn't yet moved. Despite his goosebumps, Loren readied his sword to face her.

"A hole?" Stehr snorted. "What are you talking about—"

"Namely!" Lapis cut her off, folded the finger back down, and raised her voice. In the short moment Stehr was shocked to silence, Lapis swiftly spelled it out. "While what you have produced is definitely a *Lifeless King*, I must ask, do you have any measures by which to control a *Lifeless King*?"

"What?"

That one word said everything Lapis needed to know. It was a horrible realization for everyone involved and a fatal oversight for Stehr.

"Now, I don't think you're *that* dumb," said Lapis. "So you couldn't possibly

have just created an uncontrollable *Lifeless King* without a plan, right?”

“Th-that’s... No, but the *Lifeless King* shall only bare its fangs at the living! At you! As I have already departed, I am...”

“Yep, got it. You empty-headed woman!” Lapis’s rebuke came so suddenly that Stehr forgot her anger. Lapis pointed at Scena. “That over there is a *Lifeless King*! One who draws the entire world closer to death and stands at its summit as an absolute ruler! The highest class of undead! You think it’s going to let an undead with free will exist?!”

“What?!” In her dismay, Stehr tried to flee from the *Lifeless King* floating beside her. Three steps away, she turned to look back, and her eyes met Scena’s hollow gaze.

Stehr let out a short shriek. An undead wasn’t supposed to know fear, yet her body stiffened. Scena slowly lifted her hand, and Stehr didn’t move.

“Stop! I’m—” Stehr never finished.

Scena only ever looked at her, but white flames rose from Stehr’s feet, completely enveloping her body. She had no chance to scream. By the time the flames were gone, Stehr’s face was empty and lifeless. She hung her head, like a retainer ceding to her lord. A meaningless groan rolled from her mouth, and the yellow haze around her body dissipated.

“That’s incredible,” Lapis murmured. “She drained a wight’s powers and turned it into a normal zombie.”

“What are we supposed to do about that?” Loren demanded. “And wait, am I supposed to cut Scena down?”

“Well, I’d love it if you could, but that’s a *Lifeless King* there. She will have several layers of defense against physical and magical damage, and her body perpetually emits an energy drain effect. If you think you *can* cut her—ah, no, wait.”

Lapis broke off and thought for a moment. However, before she had finished that thought, a zombified Stehr sensed their living presence and began lurching past the altar toward them. Loren reflexively swung his readied sword and bisected her from the shoulder.

“Ah, dammit!” he cursed. “She’s looking at us!”

This action had caught Scena’s attention. That hollow gaze turned on Loren, and the hand that had made a zombie of Stehr reached out once more.

If Loren was enveloped in those white flames, perhaps he would become a zombie too. He dodged and ducked, preventing Scena from locking on to him. Lapis had the same idea, kicking off in the other direction.

“*Curseflame.*”

White flames burst from the ground where Loren had been a moment before. They disappeared as suddenly as they appeared, and Scena turned on the altar, her eyes chasing Loren.

Loren knew those flames would get him the moment he stopped—so he didn’t. He slid side to side, closing the distance, and realizing his intentions, Scena mouthed a different word.

“*Phalanx.*”

Flames erupted with a slight wave of her hand, spreading out like a folding fan as they flew toward him. He managed to avoid them with a frantic leap back, yet he had in that dodge lost all the ground he’d gained.

“I can’t get close! At this rate, we’ll never know if I can cut her or not!”

“What about your projectiles?!”

“Used them up on the zombies!”

“Hmm... May the lost find their way to where they belong. *Turn Undead.*”

For a moment, Scena’s body was clad in purifying radiance, but the light soon went out. Evidently, Scena had felt nothing. She didn’t even turn to look at Lapis. Her eyes continued to chase Loren, who was reconsidering his approach.

“As expected, she resists it... That was less effective than a bug bite.”

“You sure you’re not lacking faith?”

“If you know a priest who can exorcise a *Lifeless King* with *Turn Undead*, then bring them right here, right now!” Lapis yelled, but she then had to jump back as white flames burst from where she had been standing.

Scena didn't look at Lapis, but she had registered Lapis's existence. It seemed Scena had attempted to catch her off guard, but Lapis was no ordinary target.

"Stone of red, pierce my foe. *Fire Bullet*."

Casting magic as she evaded, Lapis fired four bolts of fire from her fingertips, all of which exploded in Scena's face. That attack would have inflicted massive damage on a human, but once the smoke cleared, Scena was completely unscathed.

Lapis clicked her tongue. "So elementary magic won't even scratch her," she grumbled.

Perhaps that made Scena finally acknowledge Lapis as a hindrance—she took her eyes off Loren and turned toward the priest. With sluggish motions, she raised her palm at Lapis, who stopped moving, stared back, and smiled.

"Are you sure you should be looking at me?"

Loren hadn't let this moment slip by. Scena's eyes were on Lapis, and as a bonus, Scena was in the midst of an attack. There was no better time to approach. He dropped all evasive maneuvers and made a beeline straight for her.

"Resent me if you want!"

His downward swing never met Scena's body. She had sensed his attack, leaping off the altar as she unleashed her *Curseflame* at Lapis. Loren's blade barely grazed her sleeve, and the leftover momentum smashed the altar.



“Lapis!” Loren cried out as he saw her body enveloped in white.

He swept upward, but Scena nimbly avoided the strike. He wasn’t going to let her get away after he’d gotten so close, and he followed it up with swing after swing.

“I’m fine!” Lapis called as the flames died out, though she looked a little winded. “One shot isn’t enough to take me out.”

That attack had been enough to turn a wight into a zombie—which made Lapis even more tenacious than the undead. Terrifying.

“Be careful, Mr. Loren! What the *Lifeless King* uses isn’t magic, per se. She can cast it without warning!”

“Thanks for the heads up.”

So far, Scena had always pointed her palm before attacking. The way Lapis put it made it sound like that movement was unnecessary, and if that was true, Loren had no way of telling where or when she’d next attack.

More importantly... he thought bitterly. It was hard to imagine Scena herself had no combat experience. He was astounded that she had been able to evade so many consecutive swings. Surely being a *Lifeless King* came with certain abilities, but it was as if Scena could see through every one of his attacks. He felt like he was hacking away at smoke, and while he held her at bay, he felt his impatience growing.

“Mr. Loren! Aim here!”

He glanced toward Lapis without letting up on his offensive. She was pointing at her own chest.

“The glowing part! A normal *Lifeless King* doesn’t have that! I don’t know what will happen if you hit it, but it might be worth your while!”

That glowing spot was where he would most likely find that unknown master’s Orb of Undeath. At first, he hesitated to follow Lapis’s instructions, but the moment the *Lifeless King* heard the warning, her hands inadvertently moved to cover her chest.

“You’ve seen a normal *Lifeless King* before?” he muttered. “Well, looks like

it's worth a shot."

Naturally, the *Lifeless King* did not reply. Instead, she continued to protect her chest, her eyes darting back to Loren, her mouth raising a piercing shriek. He was overcome with a desire to block it out, but he needed his hands to do their job, and he wasn't going to give the *Lifeless King* a moment to breathe.

He would have to endure it. If he could. A sudden fatigue had set in, weighing down his chasing feet and swinging arms.

"Mr. Loren! The *Lifeless King* is strengthening her perpetual energy drain! If you don't hurry, she'll make it through my evil-ward!"

"So there's no time."

Loren hadn't been able to hit her even once. Now he had to hit a specific point on her chest, and there was even a time limit to wrestle with.

Given that, it didn't matter if he blacked out afterward. He had to do this. Once he found his resolve, he felt as if he heard something click into place at the back of his skull.

With Loren's next step, he barreled forward at speeds incomparable to his movements before. The bolts of fire cast soundlessly by the *Lifeless King* passed through the empty space he left behind.

In that time, he bounded directly into arm's reach of her and unleashed a horizontal swipe—which the *Lifeless King* tried to block by mustering her physical defenses, to no avail.

She raised no cry, and her expression didn't change. But there was a slight air of confusion about her as her forcefield shattered, and she retreated out of striking distance. She once again attempted to use some power on Loren but completely lost sight of him.

"Over here."

Scena turned to the sound only to find the point of a sword waiting for her. She reconstructed her broken forcefield, ready to take the thrust this time. Her eyes caught the symbols on the blade's black surface letting off a suspicious light, and in the next moment, the new forcefield was severed, earning her a

shallow nick on her chest.

She deployed *Phalanx*, which should have swallowed Loren whole when he was so near, but his blade was drawn back just as quickly as he had thrust it. He was already out of sight by the time the protective flames burst forth.

Loren wielded his sword at unimaginable speed for a weapon of that size. Firing one shot at a time wouldn't be enough to stop him.

The *Lifeless King* roared. Any life-form who heard the cry would be drained of its life force, yet Loren didn't stop moving. Nor did he wait for the fan of flames to fade. He stepped in with his sword at the ready, and the moment the inferno touched his blade, the flames split as if conceding to his power.

This was inconceivable. The moment the *Lifeless King* froze in disbelief, she was assailed with a storm of swings. For the first time, the king was desperately trying to dodge. Her defensive field met Loren's sword, a shrill sound striking the air. As the *Lifeless King* warded off the endless onslaught, it frantically searched for countermeasures.

Loren's advantage came in the fact that Scena, the body's former owner, had no true combat experience. Thus, the king failed to come up with any effective resistance—she had never endured anything like this before. She was forced to retreat one step at a time.

The waves of flames she released in her panic were torn to shreds by the rampaging blade, failing to so much as singe Loren's hair.

Even so, the *Lifeless King* knew no fatigue, but Loren was flesh and blood. The end would eventually come. His speed dropped bit by bit, and the *Lifeless King's* face filled with delight, knowing that soon Loren would be too tired to properly fight.

Loren struggled to keep up his assault. But before long, his attacks let up, and his sword stuck into the ground. Loren leaned against it like a walking stick.

"Dammit." Loren turned the flat of the blade toward the *Lifeless King*, hiding in its shadow to catch his breath.

With a surge of renewed power, the king fired *Phalanx*. The flames spread out around him, and while the large sword did serve as a shield to a degree, it

would only help until the heat and oxygen deprivation killed Loren for certain. The *Lifeless King* was sure of her victory.

But that victory never came.

“Eat this!” Loren’s voice came from overhead.

When she looked up, she took the sole of Loren’s boot to her chest. Her small body jolted and was sent flying back. With no idea what had just happened, she flailed her arms wildly, desperately trying to get Loren to back off. But Scena’s body was still a fledgling’s, and no matter how she swung, Loren had the clear reach advantage. She offered only paltry resistance.

Before the *Lifeless King* could construct a new forcefield, Loren’s right fist and all his body weight hammered into her chest with a dull thud, right where his boot had struck before. The clean hit smacked the *Lifeless King*’s body into the ground. She slid quite a distance and left a cloud of dust in her wake.

“That’s crazy. I can’t believe you challenged a *Lifeless King* to close-quarters combat,” Lapis mused from the sidelines.

Loren’s exhaustion had been for show. He had still possessed plenty of energy to spare when he hid behind his sword. The moment the *Lifeless King* had shot out *Phalanx*’s flames, believing her victory assured, he had used that same sword as a foothold. Both his kick and his punch had definitely inflicted damage.

“You’re not down for the count just yet, are you?!”

Loren stepped back, opening his body to attack as he reached out his left hand and single-handedly plucked his sword from its resting place. Without wasting the time to assume a stance, he swung, building up plenty of angular momentum as he sliced into the torso of the *Lifeless King* struggling to stand.

Two blunt strikes and a cut were all it took for the glowing piece at the king’s chest to crack with a dry snap. In the next moment, it crumbled, the fragments falling at Scena’s feet.

“Ah...” A small voice escaped her lips as a sliver of light returned to her hollowed eyes.

The sound made Loren hurriedly contain his next attack. In a blink, he was on

his knees, leaning on the sword to keep him up as a surge of fatigue rendered him immobile. “The recoil...is here.”

He could hardly move. This was no different from his usual comedown, but typically, he quickly lost consciousness as well. Yet now, while somewhat hazy, he managed to retain himself as he stared at the *Lifeless King*.

Loren understood that this exhaustion had nothing to do with getting used to his bursts of strength. If it did, he would have grown accustomed to the fatigue long ago. So why was he awake this time? His eyes were naturally drawn to the sword holding him up.

“It couldn’t be.”

This blade was all that had changed. But if the large sword was the cause, then the item he held would have to be a demonic blade—an unfathomable rarity. Of course, something like that wouldn’t just be sold in stores, and if it was, it would be a few factors of ten higher than what Lapis had paid.

He tried looking toward her when a thud caught his ears, and he looked that way instead.

“Mi...ster.”

Scena’s left arm had fallen—straight out of its socket. The cross section was filled with a white substance. There was no blood left in her body. As she stared at it in wonder, she tried getting to her feet, only for her right leg to tear off as well.

“What’s happening?” Loren asked, teeth grit.

Lapis crouched to study Scena. “Her body is breaking down. It was reckless to turn a normal person into a *Lifeless King*. It’s likely the Orb of Undeath was maintaining her, and now that it’s broken, she can no longer retain her form.”

While the fallen left arm held its shape for a while, it eventually crumbled as if made of ash, swept up as white grains in the breeze.

“Anything we can do?”

“I think this is the result of a modification on *Become Undead*—a heretical spell. The original version is cast on oneself and doesn’t create an undead of

nearly so high a rank. To cast it on another to create a *Lifeless King*...the spell was pushed much too far. And now it comes back to bite the victim. There is nothing we can do.”

Scena continued to crumble. More and more white powder poured onto the ground, and Scena stared at it absentmindedly. Her eyes met Loren’s, and she asked, “Am I...going to...die...Mister?”

“Yeah. Sounds like it.” He wasn’t going to lie or pretty it up.

“I see... But I’m glad...I won’t cause...more trouble.”

Scena was apparently aware of what she had done while bound as the *Lifeless King*. If things had carried on, she knew there would have been countless more casualties. So she was glad to fall here without killing anyone else.

“It’s thanks...to you.”

“Don’t thank me. I didn’t do anything. I just cut you down.”

Whether that had saved Scena or not, Loren had done it out of necessity. Considering his original objective, this quest was a failure.

“Thank you.” Still, she offered him gratitude.

“Dammit...” Forcing those words out had increased the speed of her decay. Loren forced his own exhausted legs to carry him forward. In the end, he could at least hold her hand as she went.

“Ah? Hold on—”

Lapis tried to say something, but Loren didn’t stop. He gripped Scena’s outstretched right hand before it disappeared. But she held form for only a moment before she was dust between his fingers.

“You’re a good person...” The whisper traveled from disappearing lips.

There was nothing he could do. Scena’s crumbling face smiled as he clenched the white powder in his hand.

“But a little too careless.” Scena’s voice was suddenly vividly clear.

Loren reeled back in shock, but he could already feel his mind leaving him at a rapid pace. What had he just heard? He couldn’t even lift his body to ask Lapis.

Slowly, he fell. Scena's decay was complete the moment his body hit the ground, and there he lay, coated in white ash.

He didn't know why, but only then did he lose everything. He couldn't move a single finger. He faintly heard Lapis's voice as he lost consciousness.

"Mr. Loren? Hey, Mr. Loren?!"

Epilogue:

Waking to Rest

“CAN’T SAY I didn’t see this coming.”

Loren heard Lapis’s somewhat sullen voice as he lay on the bed. However, he did his best not to look at her. His eyes remained locked on the ceiling.

They were back in Kaffa. Loren was once again bedridden in one of its numerous hospitals.

“How much trouble do you think I went through after that? Your body is already too heavy for my delicate little arms. And there’s quite a height difference between us. Your legs drag even when I carry you on my back.”

“Right, my boots are ruined now. I might have to replace them.”

His expenses did pile up, and given that, one pair of boots wasn’t too significant an addendum. He embraced something close to resignation as he decided he would consult Chuck. That was a man who looked like he knew where to find cheap boots.

But Lapis’s scolding went on. “You’re already heavy, and I had to carry the sword too. I’ve worked so hard, it would be downright criminal for me to go without compensation. Do you have anything you’d like to say?”

Loren’s sword was so heavy even a warrior would have trouble lifting it with two hands. Seeing how Lapis had apparently been able to drag it along, he was starting to get a clearer idea of just how strong she was.

“Let’s put that aside for a moment. Hey, Lapis.”

“Yes, what is it?”

She had been complaining for so long, yet it took only a few words for her to give up altogether. She just wanted to whine—she wasn’t particularly angry. Or perhaps she was just quick to shift gears. Loren didn’t know for sure, but there was something he had to make sure of regardless.

“What happened after I passed out?”

He knew Scena had become a *Lifeless King* and that he had defeated her by destroying the Orb of Undeath in her chest. Knowing that a normal *Lifeless King* didn't have that weak point, he was pretty sure he wouldn't be able to fight one of them—but whatever the case, Scena was defeated, her body fell apart, and at the very end, her mind returned to her.

He remembered reaching to grab her hand and gripping its crumbling remnants. Then he got the feeling Scena whispered a few words... But he had fallen unconscious right after. He still couldn't recall.

"That's the part I don't really understand." Lapis pulled up a chair, took a seat, and cocked her head. "You got close to her when she was breaking down, and that was terribly careless of you. A *Lifeless King* isn't necessarily destroyed just because its body falls apart."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Are you aware that all entities are comprised of both a material and an astral body?"

Loren shook his head.

"The material is the physical body. The astral is, perhaps, what I would call the spiritual body. Life exists in the overlap between them. It's a pain to get into the details, but suffice to say, damage to the material side of things does not guarantee damage to the astral."

Do you get it? she seemed to imply as she stared into his face. She had summed it up so even he could understand, and he nodded to urge her on.

"There are hardly any creatures out there with a proper grasp of the distinction. It's the fundamental theorem that permits high-level blessings to regenerate missing body parts, but to the point—with two bodies per individual, death only comes after the collapse of both."

To those who could not meaningfully grasp or manipulate the distinction between the two bodies, death was generally defined with the death of the material. In the cases where the astral body persisted, the highest possible rank of blessing—called *Resurrection*—could bring back the deceased. That said, the astral body gradually degenerated when the material body died. It would

eventually face its own death, which put a window on how long *Resurrection* could work.

“How are these astral bodies different from ghosts?”

“Ghosts are the mere shadow of an astral body given form for whatever reason. It’s impossible to revive a ghost, though there are necromancers out there researching the possibility.”

“Okay, I kinda understand. But if the material body dies, the astral one’s toast without intervention, right?”

“As I said, those with proper awareness of the distinction can persist a while as an astral body even if their material form is destroyed. And a *Lifeless King* is one of the few entities known to do so.”

Meaning, while the recoil of the Orb of Undeath had destroyed Scena’s body, that was only the material side, and the state of her astral form was still unknown. As long as its astral body persisted, it was hard to say a *Lifeless King* was truly dead, and approaching it in that state had been quite careless.

“How’s a mercenary supposed to know that? Well, I’ll admit I wasn’t thinking.”

“My thoughts exactly. That said, the *Lifeless King*’s body continued to crumble, and all that happened was you lost consciousness. So I guess the orb’s recoil was strong enough to drag the astral body into its own destruction.”

A bit of relief seeped into Lapis’s words. She was angry at Loren but also glad he was safe.

Loren cleared his throat, a tad embarrassed. *But...*

He glanced toward the very edge of his field of vision. There was nothing but ceiling wherever he looked, but just in the corner—always the corner—a girl in a white dress floated, flapping a pair of wings. She had been there since he opened his eyes, and not only did she somewhat resemble Scena, it was now clear that Lapis couldn’t see her.

“Did I really...*just* fall unconscious?” he asked.

Perhaps he had hit his head somewhere. He worried he had come down with

some mental illness, and he tried to ask Lapis, who had medical knowledge. He wasn't just going to say he was seeing floating hand-sized girls now. That was the sort of statement that would get him tossed in an asylum of some sort.

"I could get you checked up if you're that concerned, but you're healthy as can be. However, your recoil this time around was incomparably worse than the last. I won't beat around the bush—you were one step from dead."

Lapis had dragged him back to the Hansa hospital in a flurry, forcing Claes, who was dead tired, to load the patients into the wagon as she shoved Loren in. Once again, she'd fastened the boy to their horse and forced him to speed their journey straight from Hansa to Kaffa.

Thanks to that, Brosse, Ange, Laure, and Leila had survived. Overuse of *Boost* had left Claes out cold by the time they reached Kaffa, and he was currently sentenced to complete bed rest as his party looked after him. The kid wasn't too bad—once Loren was honest with himself—and he hoped that the incident didn't leave Claes traumatized. Not that he could do anything about it.

Of course, Loren had been in such a state that he might have died had Lapis not pushed Claes so hard, so he was thankful. Once he got better, he would at least pay the kid a visit.

Oh, crap. Almost dead, huh? "How much did the treatment cost this time?"

"This is your seventh day in the hospital, Mr. Loren. The hospitalization only cost seventeen silver, but...we came up with a bit of a separate expense."

"What happened?"

"As I said, you were right at death's door. It was a race against time, and no normal medical procedures would have rescued you in time. You weren't even visibly injured. Frankly, it's a mystery how you even pushed yourself to that point." Lapis folded her arms.

Loren sighed; he could already see where this was going. Normal methods hadn't worked, so she had resorted to something abnormal. The abnormal always cost money.

"How much?"

“I used an elixir, one gold a piece. And I had to use five of them.”

“By that point, you should’ve just let me die.”

Five gold was a small fortune—though a reasonable price for the finest elixir. Still, hearing the sum after all was said and done made him feel like dying all over again. He didn’t know whether he should celebrate his survival or bemoan the fact that he hadn’t croaked.

<I don’t know if I’m one to talk, but live and learn, Mister. Something good will happen someday.> Loren’s eyes snapped toward Lapis, who hadn’t seemed to hear those words. She stared back, somewhat startled.

<I’m sorry. I do feel guilty, but it just kind of happened when you touched my hand, and I thought: I don’t want to die yet.> “What’s with that?” he found himself saying.

Lapis continued staring at him, trying to figure out what he meant. The girl floating in Loren’s vision frantically waved her hands.

<We can talk even if you don’t say anything aloud. I’m just an astral body renting a room in your material one.> *What about my private life?* he replied in a huff.

The girl despondently lowered her head. *<I’ll try my best not to dig into the deeper parts. But...if it’s too much of a bother, I’ll leave.>* *Then what happens?*

<I have no material body, nor can I construct one. I’ll slowly fade away.> *Then how am I supposed to kick you out?*

Loren wasn’t cold enough to evict someone knowing they would die. It was with a heavy heart that he had to accept he was keeping a little girl in his head. But that just meant he would have to take his time looking into the matter. There was no need to make a rash decision. Or so he forcibly convinced himself.

“Ah... Mr. Loren? Is something wrong? Are you feeling ill?” Lapis seemed to be imagining something else given his silence.

He told her it was nothing, then reached for that resigned state of mind he’d had before. “You paid for the treatment again.”

“Oh, yes, I did. And, well... I’ll just add it to your debt. Hospitalization,

medicine, and miscellaneous fees add up to six gold and twenty-one silver.”

“Which means exactly thirty gold in total... These debts just keep piling up.”

“The quest was designated a failure, but they did concede some reparations. I couldn’t convince them a *Lifeless King* showed up, but we were paid for the zombies and revenants.”

“It’s gonna be a ruckus. Sure, it was a small city-state, but a whole nation just fell.”

Not that anyone had confirmed this with him. He just guessed this was the case based on Lapis’s supposition and Stehr’s reaction. Who knew what sort of impact Hansa’s fall would have?

However, the face Lapis made was quite suspect.

“What?”

“About that... It seems the undead roaming the greater Hansa region disappeared altogether.”

For some strange reason, the girl floating in the corner of Loren’s vision looked awfully proud of herself. Actually, she resembled some kind of fairy now, even though she was the astral body of the highest form of undead.

Perhaps she had done something on the road back.

“Whatever it is, we should be glad the threat’s gone,” said Loren.

“Well, thanks to all that, they didn’t believe us about the bone dragon either.”

“Nothing we can do about that. Just means the day I repay my debt is pretty far off.”

“You know, I don’t really care if you pay it off or not.”

Having heard her say it didn’t matter so many times, Loren realized he was beginning to find it inconsequential as well. Also Scena was now, for some reason, kowtowing in the corner of his eye. He decided he needed a little more sleep.



Bonus Story:

From the Notes of a Certain Priest

HELLO, I'M LAPIS. Just your average, everyday demon.

You might say that introducing myself as a demon contradicts my claim to be average, and in fact, a lot of people (humans, that is) think so. But get a large enough group of any people together, and it makes sense that most of them would be average, no?

Putting all that philosophizing aside, you may be wondering why a normal, healthy little demon girl is writing this meaningless spiel. Well, it all started one morning when my parents suddenly kicked me out of the house saying I needed to go see the wider world.

Now then, it turned out that the skilled mercenary I'd just met last time I wrote was a complete amateur when it came to adventuring. He was quite a mixed bag, but I successfully got his promise to accompany me.

Considering how this saved me the trouble of having to infiltrate another party, you must understand that Mr. Loren is quite important to me. Of course, I acquired his promise through a bit of debt, but I'm sure that issue will resolve itself with experience and time.

Incidentally, is it really that common for novice adventurers to be picked on by their more experienced seniors? From what I've gathered, adventurers who've only just registered are frequently shaken down for money, and at other times, the young women are simply snatched away. But if it's really so common, I have to wonder why the guild hasn't done anything about it.

In fact, if they're not doing anything about it, perhaps that means they tacitly authorize these misdeeds. This bullying happened to Mr. Loren, of all people, who's clearly a skilled swordsman to anyone with eyes. Sure, he might be a beginner in the knowledge department, but his fighting technique at least ranks squarely in the territory of veteran. He swings a sword thicker than my waist!

And I mean, it's not like he's hiding his strength, and most intelligent life-forms should immediately realize this, but... Suffice to say, it seems there are people out there to whom that designation doesn't apply. I struggle to understand.

There is one thing worth noting, though. The iron-rank adventurers who picked a fight with Mr. Loren in the bar likened him to a gigolo, and I must admit, that is true in a sense. Of course, I'm the one who devised the situation. And I have no objections to providing for him! However, the truth hits harder than baseless slander. When I told them no women would tolerate their own mooching, they flew into a rage. Yes, the truth sure is cruel.

At times, anger can heighten a person's strength and resolve, but in this case, those iron-ranks had picked the wrong opponent. After their rest in the hospital, I assume they'll take a better look at who they're dealing with before they try something similar. Although, that little tussle allowed me to increase Mr. Loren's debt, so I might thank them if I remember.

On that note, wanting to repay debt is quite a respectable attitude. The problem is that once Loren pays his off, nothing will bind him to me. That said, if he took advantage of my generosity and started wasting my money, he probably wouldn't be a suitable companion.

As such, Mr. Loren taking that herb quest was just the sort of thing I was hoping for; though he was the first adventurer I'd ever seen go herb-harvesting unarmed. Additionally, it certainly was naïve of him to think he would be able to pay me off with such meager quests.

He owes me an amount that he wouldn't match even if he plucked the forest dry. Though it wasn't a bad start on the path to escaping the way of the mendicant. I went along, thinking I could make some spare change, but I never imagined we would have a run-in with forest wolves. Seeing Mr. Loren fight them off with his bare hands definitely went beyond my expectations.

And get this, the forest wolves were about to attack a girl in the middle of the forest. I don't know if Mr. Loren has good or bad timing at this point, but his knack for running into strangeness never ceases to amaze me. Although, the girl was lucky too. If another adventurer had found her, well, there are a number of ill-natured folk in the trade who would gladly perpetrate what I hesitate to pen.

But Mr. Loren took the girl back to town without any funny business. He is kind, that Mr. Loren.

About the girl—I'd like to note that she had a strange air about her right from the moment we first laid eyes on her. Her clothes weren't dirty despite her having collapsed in the forest, and while we found her barefoot, her soles were pristine. It was as if she had suddenly appeared there from nowhere at all. I like to avoid any shady business, but as an adventurer, this was a clear chance to make money. Sometimes, concessions must be made.

We took the girl to town, and to be perfectly blunt, it was a tableau I wouldn't blame anyone for mistaking as criminal in nature. Mr. Loren is a former mercenary after all, and he does look rather intimidating. The sight of him carrying an unconscious barefoot girl in a shift could so easily be construed as a kidnapping. In fact, I've heard that people flashing weapons or using drugs to abduct girls is not uncommon in the human world.

In demon territory, anyone who would do something so shameless without proper reason would be promptly exiled to the world of the beyond. But, well, it's apparently much easier to get away with among humans.

Incidentally, when I say "proper reason," I mean there is a slight chance of being pardoned—if the kidnapped girl is of another race. If she is a demon, all extenuating circumstances are completely disregarded.

I've gotten off track. Right, in this case, I think people realized no one would be foolish enough to abduct someone and boldly walk through the front gate of a town, and given my standing as a priest, we didn't cause a fuss. Mr. Loren often forgets, but priests lend an incredible degree of credibility to any situation. He could be a little grateful, but I wonder.

In any case, it's common practice to deliver any stranded folk of unknown origin to the adventurers' guild. Any problematic things should be swiftly handed off to the proper officials—ah, I mean, it's dangerous to drag around an unknown factor for too long—ah... To the point, city officials are occasionally corrupt, and to avoid any politicking, anyone registered as an adventurer would probably rather deal with the guild staff.

Then what do you do if the guild is corrupt? Well, the guild has a few

measures instated to penalize depravity and falsehood. To be honest, the adventurers' guild is so stringent with itself about these things that if *they* are corrupt, it wouldn't be melodramatic to say the whole world is much the same.

Excluding demons, of course. Rotten demons don't live long. They're weeded out—disappearing without a trace before you realize what's happened. Thus, they can never get away with their nonsense.

Returning to the main subject.

We entrusted the girl we saved to the guild only for them to place a restriction on our movements. They had to investigate the incident to make sure there was no criminality on our parts. But as we had nothing to hide, what an enticing restriction it was! Food, drink, and housing for free.

I haven't reached a conclusion on the matter, but I've begun to think there is nothing better than getting things for free. Some say that which is free is bought for the highest price—I disagree. It isn't, so long as you exercise proper judgment. Though I admit there are times when this adage might turn out to be true, so you really do have to look out for yourself.

I hoped I would be able to enjoy myself for a bit, but the adventurers' guild was as prompt as I expected, and unfortunately, their investigation was over in no time. However, I was a bit put out that they wouldn't tell us what they learned.

I might have been a bit forceful, but Mr. Loren worked his wiles for once, so I had to go along with his plan. I also have to say thanks to Mr. Chuck for arranging it so we could loop ourselves back in to the matter. Yes, I'll *definitely* have to remember to offer my thanks in some form one of these days.

I'm also thankful that Mr. Loren finally decided to splurge. His debt continues to increase, and I didn't even have to work for it that time—but even more importantly, I finally had an excuse to replace the gear he'd broken last time around.

There are a number of considerably nice pieces back at my base, so I could have just picked a few out and tossed them at him, but Mr. Loren wouldn't be able to exercise his true strength without a weapon close to the one he was most used to wielding. I wasn't just going to find one of those overly large

swords lying around—or so I thought until I suddenly recalled that blade I’d “borrowed” from the warehouse back home. I was sure its size and performance would suffice; I hurried to my base and rushed back to Kaffa once I had everything I needed.

My next issue was how I’d get Loren to buy the coat and sword. I considered selling them to some random shop and buying them back later—but that method was unreliable. After mulling over what to do, I decided to be honest. I said, “I want to get some equipment to my partner, but I don’t want him to know it’s from me,” and a certain old man who ran a weapon shop agreed to help me out.

Honesty is the best policy. With certain humans, at least. What would be the point if I put together some needlessly convoluted scheme and my gifts never reached Mr. Loren’s hands?

Anyway, I took Mr. Loren to the shop, but that was where he met a most disagreeable man. By my first appraisal, the idiot wasn’t all talk, but he definitely had an attitude problem. I was sure I’d need to educate him a bit, but Mr. Loren said it was nothing, so I retreated at his discretion.

Despite the slight hiccup, I managed to outfit Mr. Loren. All that was left was to infiltrate the quest to return the girl we saved—Scena Lombardia—to her home state of Hansa. That meant working with the idiot we met at the shop, but I decided ignoring him would be our best bet. However, I couldn’t shake the strange feeling that we were going to be stuck with him for a while.

It would be hard to say the journey to deliver Miss Scena went smoothly. The guild invested quite a bit of money into the operation—enough for three wagons. However, all of a sudden, the driver of Scena’s wagon—as well as the female adventurers riding with her—grew ill or worse. Two of them died for unknown reasons.

Their ominous deaths weirded out the others and caused them to isolate Miss Scena. To be fair, the task at hand was to take her to her country; no one was under any obligation *not* to shun and alienate her. However, Mr. Loren suggested we keep her close. He is rather kind, that Mr. Loren.

Of note, he is especially kind to little girls, a matter that I do have some

thoughts on, but I figured, well, granting his wish would do a whole lot more for *my* image, and... No, it's nothing. You heard nothing. I am, fundamentally, a servant of god. One must always be kind to little girls. Those that misconstrue these virtues and take kindness as brownnosing must be physically corrected, and not in front of impressionable young eyes. In any case, I knew that was the right time to contain myself. Even I know how to bottle up.

The next day, the women refused to ride in Miss Scena's wagon, and we ended up joining her. Honestly, I had a faint idea of what was going on by then, but I wasn't going to open my mouth without proof. It definitely wasn't that keeping my mouth closed would be more interesting. Make no mistake.

During the ride, I tried to call Mr. Loren the Cleaving Gale, but he denied his claim to the moniker. There's a chance that the Cleaving Gale really is someone else, but it's hard to imagine anyone else fitting Mr. Loren's exact description. I think it's more likely that Mr. Loren is rather dense. That might be a problem.

Putting that aside, I thought our troubles were over, but we were soon beset by another undead attack. Undead attacks are rare in the daytime, not that it mattered. More importantly, that nasty idiot—that iron-rank adventurer called Claes—he finally proved he wasn't just talk. His personality was one thing, but his skills were considerable.

What's more, with the rare gift he possessed, he was a talent no nation would leave alone. One of his companions looked like a knight, so it seemed likely a country had already reached out to him.

I wanted to be cautious with her. Stay out of sight, out of mind.

Of course, right as I was thinking that, the bone dragon appeared. Everyone and their mother could tell something was up at that point. Of course, knowing something is wrong doesn't make one capable of resolving the matter. Before we knew it, the bone dragon grabbed one of Mr. Claes's comrades—the magician.

Abandoning her would have been the safest bet, but right away Mr. Loren leveraged his incredible might to rescue the magician as the dragon's stance crumbled. Once again, I was reminded of his tremendous skills.

To make sure his hard work didn't go to waste, I made Mr. Claes use plenty of

his valuable gift to get us away. We all got out safe and managed to arrive at Miss Scena's home of Hansa.

Okay, fine, I'll admit that apart from us, and Mr. Claes's party, and Mr. Brosse, who we had gotten to know pretty well, everyone else was killed.

Anyway, Hansa was quite wonderfully built, though its residents were missing. A bizarre situation, certainly, but it happens now and then.

In the middle of their search, Mr. Loren and Miss Scena found a survivor named Ms. Stehr in town, but really, wasn't she a bit too obviously suspicious? Is it really so common to coincidentally find a sole survivor in a completely vacant city? Perhaps it's not *impossible*. But I must say, it was far too convenient to believe.

Putting her aside—Mr. Loren always said he did nothing but fight when he was a mercenary, but he's so multitalented I have to wonder if that was really the case. I was surprised when he turned to smithing in preparation for the zombie attack, but come to think of it, who's to say he went to a blacksmith every time he had to maintain his own weapon? Perhaps it was more convenient to be able to do a bit on his own. I find myself interested in the mercenary company that instilled these skills in him.

Perhaps I'll meet their remnants, someday, someplace.

In any case, I thought it was high time to compare notes with him, but that was the moment the undead picked to attack. Legions of them, and all of the sort I was getting sick and tired of seeing. My only takeaway was that Mr. Claes was the perfect bait for the undead when he was under the effects of *Boost*.

They gathered surprisingly fast. I was just thinking we might want to leave Mr. Claes and go hunt down the source—clean them up on our own, you know—when something happened that I had, unfortunately, predicted.

Ms. Stehr abducted Miss Scena. Loren and I were compelled to leave the clinic to Mr. Claes and gave chase through the city.

Even though Mr. Claes faced a horde of weak undead, given that they came in such numbers, I was sure he'd be overwhelmed and forced to join their ranks soon enough. That he survived in those circumstances suggests he might

actually be rather clever. Talent has nothing to do with personality, I suppose. Though Mr. Claes had been acting quite a bit humbler ever since Mr. Loren saved his magician.

When it comes to Ms. Stehr, I have nothing of note to write. I do feel a little drawn to her mention of “the master,” but I have far too little information to discern the nature of this individual. Perhaps we’ll meet someday, if fate wills it. And I’m sure I can ponder the matter if and when we do. If we never meet, then I won’t have wasted time thinking about nothing.

More importantly, Miss Scena. Of all things, the effects of some enchanted item turned her into a *Lifeless King*: the highest rank of undead, with whom it is said every encounter proves fatal.

I was in awe of the technology that made this transformation possible but deplored the person using it. Right, I fail to understand the logic behind creating something beyond your control. Is that some roundabout way of suicide?

In any case, those incomprehensible actions pitted us against the *Lifeless King*, and I was left wondering if Stehr and her unknown master really had to make things so difficult.

Also, is it just me, or was Mr. Loren thinking something incredibly rude when he looked at me in the middle of that battle? I do feel the urge to interrogate him, yet a part of me fears the answer. Perhaps I should just leave him be.

But you know, Mr. Loren really is an incredible swordsman. It was hard to call that unstable device that turned Miss Scena into a *Lifeless King* perfect and therefore difficult to call Miss Scena a true *Lifeless King*. Yet there is no doubt she was a fearsome entity.

It took an unbelievable warrior to challenge her head-on, taking full advantage of her lack of combat experience to crack the Orb of Undeath sustaining her. It was thanks to Mr. Loren that we defeated a *Lifeless King*...but he’s still far too kind. He grasped its—or rather, Scena’s—hand as she crumbled away.

I suspect it was more pity than carelessness, but I really think he needs to look out for himself. Though I do also think that’s one of his good points.

For now, my examination has failed to find anything wrong with Mr. Loren's body, so I guess that's a load off my mind. The fact that he ended up in another hospital is part of the fun.

Now let's work hard raising those debts! All's well that ends well.

I think I'll end my notes here for now.

It's always nice to have more things to talk about with Mother when I get home. I get the feeling something outrageous will happen if I show this to Father, but I'm sure Mr. Loren will be fine. I can see it all being a load of trouble, though.

Anyway, I guess I'll set my pen down until our next adventure.

Afterword

TO ALL THOSE new to my work, it's a pleasure to meet you. And a pleasure to those who aren't as well. If you were with me last time, it's nice to see you again.

The name's Mine, an oddball amateur writer who submits his work, day after day, to a site called *Let's Be Novelists*. If anything, I hope I've done a good enough job that you come away from this remembering my name.

I've actually done another series with Hobby Japan before—*New Life+: Young Again in Another World*. Perhaps some of you have heard about it. If you haven't, I couldn't be happier if you took this opportunity to test the waters with that one too.

Now then, on to *The Strange Adventure of a Broke Mercenary*. It's thanks to your valued patronage that we received a second volume. If anyone is reading this in a bookstore before taking it to the checkout, I'm begging you to take it home with you. I can only hope that this tale of a skilled mercenary who's still naïve as an adventurer and the priest who follows him will manage to alleviate your boredom, if only a little.

The first volume was released alongside a volume of *New Life+*. If nothing major happens, this one should also be released on the same day as *New Life+* Volume 16. I'd consider myself blessed if you read them both, but I don't know why they keep overlapping. I'm not the one doing it. It's not even just those two volumes. The manga version of *New Life+* is being released around the same date as well. Am I the only one who thinks they should space them out a bit?

I think there should be some staggering from the next volume onward. This should be the last time that happens. Of course, that only matters if I get another volume. But that's the fate of all writers.

I hope we can meet again...

This is the last part, don't worry.

To Hobby Japan's editing department, to the proofreaders, to the designers, and to everyone in the industry. To peroshi, who drew so many wonderful

illustrations once again. To my editor K-sama, who makes time to talk over the phone with me every so often. You all have my sincerest gratitude.

And my thanks to you, dear reader, as well.

I hope for your continued patronage, I pray that we will meet again in my next book. And with that, I'll bring it to a close.

—Mine



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